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Prince Harry: Shakespeare’s Critique of Machiavelli

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“Among the features specific to the text of Henry V its apparent property of giving rise to particularly acrimonious division of opinion has often been noted. To say that there are two camps sharply opposing each other is indeed almost a commonplace of critical literature, the one camp firmly applauding what they see as a panegyric upon, indeed a rousing celebration of, ‘the mirror of all Christian Kings’ and most successful English monarch of all the histories; and the followers of the other camp deriding with no less conviction the exaltation of a Machiavellian conqueror in a rapacious, and, after all, senseless war.” (Walch 1988, 63)

In recent years a small but growing literature has emerged urging the serious treatment of Shakespeare as a political thinker (Asquith 2005, Alexander 2004, Craig 2001, Spierkerman 2001, Alvis 2000, Joughin 1997, A. Bloom 1996). Despite the quality of much of this work, however, the depth and importance of Shakespeare’s political thought remains far from established in contemporary Anglo-American political theory. This article contributes to the case for Shakespeare as a serious political thinker by drawing on his often-neglected Histories. It does so by revealing a sharp, albeit implicit, critique of Niccolo Machiavelli’s political thought in Shakespeare’s Henriad (Henry IV, parts I and II, and Henry V), and particularly in the story of Prince Harry’s maturation into Henry V. Here Shakespeare shows, contra Machiavelli, that political virtu can in practice create political legitimacy only at an insupportable human cost. This realist line of critique was both original and forceful, as this article will show.

The article also contributes to an ongoing debate over whether Shakespeare had actually read Machiavelli (for overview, see Grady...
Although Shakespeare does make explicit reference to Machiavelli in the plays, and, as Felix Raab has convincingly shown, “Machiavelli was being quite widely read in England” for a decade before Shakespeare wrote the Henriad, the balance of scholarly opinion today remains that Shakespeare had not read Machiavelli first hand (Raab 1964, 52-57). This article offers new reasons to think that he did.

Finally, there is a longstanding and heated debate among readers and audiences over how to read Henry V, and in particular how to assess its title character. Is the play a nationalist paean to “the mirror of all Christian kings” (as presented in Olivier’s 1942 film) or a politically subversive denunciation of a Machiavellian monster (as more clearly suggested in Kenneth Branagh’s 1989 film)? This article suggests that both traditional interpretations are inadequate for several reasons—both suffer from a tendency to read Henry V in isolation from the other history plays, both ignore the valid insights of the other, and by consequence both sharply underestimate the ambition and complexity of Shakespeare’s political thought. Once Henry V is placed in its dramatic context and read in relation to Machiavelli’s political thought, a central theme that emerges is the extreme difficulty of consolidating an illegitimate dynasty on the throne, regardless of the virtuosity of the prince. Harry himself is presented as a deliberately ambiguous figure—a supremely gifted and inspiring prince who is prepared to commit terribly moral wrongs to unify his country and legitimate his dynasty; he is the most glorious of English kings, but also, ultimately, a failure. This re-reading revolves around two key claims: first, that Shakespeare portrays Harry as an exemplary Machiavellian prince, and second, that Shakespeare provides the material of a telling critique of Harry’s policy and the Machiavellian thought that informs it. The second section of this article develops the former claim and the third the latter. The first section locates Henry V within the cycle of English Histories.

I. THE HENRIAD IN SHAKESPEARE’S ENGLISH HISTORIES

Shakespeare’s cycle of eight sequential English Histories presents, in Herschel Baker’s words, a story of “sin and retribution” (Baker 1974, 801). The sin is committed in the first play, Richard II, in which Henry Bullingbrook, the Duke of Herford, usurps his ineffectual cousin, Richard II. The punishment covers the remainder of the Histories through to the eventual accession of the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, at the end of Richard III. The overall structure of the cycle is closest to that of tragedy: fall and gradual destruction ending in a suggestion of restored order (Shaw 1985, 61-67). In characteristic style, Shakespeare suggests multiple explanations for this tragic
fall. As in Macbeth, which exhibits a similar narrative structure of regicide-disorder/punishment-restoration, Shakespeare intimates both a traditional supernatural explanation for events, and a more realistic political-psychological logic at work. Shakespeare puts the providential explanation in the narrative background—sin disrupts the divine order and needs to be expiated before order can eventually be restored. In the dramatic foreground, however, he presents a more realistic, political-psychological rationale. Rule without legitimacy cultivates mounting disorders, both political and psychological, which collaborate to unravel the social fabric and to drive politics into a vicious cycle of rebellion and tyranny.

In developing the background providential interpretation of the historical cycle, Shakespeare suggests a moral critique of Machiavelli’s work that parallels Machiavelli’s historical critics, from Innocent Gentillet’s Contre-Machiavel through Frederick II’s Anti-Machiavel: Machiavellian politics is morally evil and ultimately incurs divine punishment. In elaborating the foreground political-psychological drama, however, Shakespeare opened a new and fertile front of Machiavelli critique—that Machiavelli failed exactly where he himself was proudest, in providing a realistic account of human nature and the way in which it structures political possibilities (Machiavelli 1979, 78, 126-27).

The main analytical focus of this essay will be on the political-psychological explanation for the historical cycles’ narrative arc, but this is not intended to deny or discount the traditional rhetoric of divine judgment which suffuses the plays. However bad a King Richard II may have been, he remained, as he himself never tires of pointing out, “The deputy elected by the Lord” (III.ii.57). According to traditional divine right doctrine, as Richard himself exclaims, “Not all the water in the rough rude sea/Can wash the balm off from an anointed king” (III.ii.54-55). Consequently his removal (and murder) are “in a Christian climate so...heinous, black, obscene a deed” that they bring the entire land, but the House of Lancaster in particular, under God’s curse (IV.i.131). Following Richard’s removal, the Bishop of Carlisle foresees the terrible doom that has been called down upon England as a consequence of this unnatural act:

The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act.
Peace shall go to sleep with Turks and infidels,
And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound.
Disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny
Shall here inhabit, and this land be call’d
The field of Golgotha and dead men’s skulls. (IV.i.137-44)

Of course Carlisle is right. The dramatic scope of this punitive strife is enormous, covering the remaining seven plays of the historical cycle. Misrule and mounting civil wars convulse the kingdom, finally culminating in Richard III’s brief but bloody tyranny and ultimate defeat at Bosworth Field.

In developing his theme of crime and punishment, however, Shakespeare encounters an enormous historical problem—Henry V. Between the rebellion-filled reign of the usurper Henry (IV) Bullingbrook, and the disastrous reign of his grandson Henry VI that began the terrible civil Wars of the Roses, Shakespeare is confronted with the brief but undeniably glorious reign of Henry V, conqueror of France. Shakespeare has to deal with only one great king to confound Carlisle’s prophecy, but that one is historically inescapable.

Shakespeare’s problem, then, is how he can fit Harry’s reign into his story of regicide and retribution. I want to suggest that Shakespeare solves the problem by presenting Harry as an embodiment of Machiavellian political virtu who is able to seize fortuna, and briefly achieve unity at home through conquest abroad. Despite his remarkable victory at Agincourt, however, Shakespeare reminds us that Harry’s success proves short-lived. He thus shows that a genuinely gifted and devoted Machiavellian prince can sometimes momentarily reverse the process of political degeneration associated with illegitimacy, but the effect lasts only as long as his tour-de-force performance as Warrior-King does. Moreover, the psychological demands of the performance prove unsustainable for the leader, and impose some heavy costs on the people. In short, the victory is pyrrhic.

Of course, Harry never explicitly invokes the image of Machiavelli, and nor does any other character in reference to him. But this is only a testament to the success of Harry’s political performance: he never appears publicly as the brutal political realist that we, the audience, are permitted to see that he is. In this way, Harry realizes one of Machiavelli’s central political precepts: one must know how to be bad while always appearing good (Machiavelli 1979, 127-28). It is through what he reveals directly and indirectly to the audience that we must assess Harry’s character and what Shakespeare illustrates through him. In the following section, I examine Harry’s Machiavellian character and behavior.
II. Harry as an Exemplary Machiavellian Prince

Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is a manual on how to rule successfully dedicated to Lorenzo de Medici. Both because it is addressed to Lorenzo, and because Machiavelli wants to confront the most difficult cases, the book is primarily concerned with the question of how a *new* prince, especially one whose legitimacy is unclear, can consolidate his position. As Machiavelli summarizes, “The things written above, if followed prudently, make a new prince seem well established and render him immediately safer and more established in his state than if he had been in it for some time….they attract men much more and bind them to him more strongly than does ancient blood” (*Machiavelli* 1979, 157). Indeed, some commentators have identified Machiavelli’s focus on the practical problem of legitimating governance as the root of his originality and influence. J. G. A. Pocock, for example, writes that “his great originality is that of a student of delegitimized politics” (*Pocock* 1975, 136). Machiavelli’s work then, and especially *The Prince*, speaks very directly to Harry’s position, and Harry follows its precepts closely.

The central action of *Henry V* is, of course, the war with France, and so it is probably the best place to begin to explore Harry’s political strategy. As Shakespeare presents it (skipping the first two years of Harry’s reign (1413-15) including the Lollard rebellion), the entirety of Harry’s policy is immediate war with France: as Harry declares in the second scene, “we have now no thought in us but France” (*I.ii.302*). By relentlessly pursuing a war of conquest, Harry cynically fulfills his dying father’s Machiavellian advice to him, to “busy giddy minds/With foreign quarrels” (*II Henry IV*, IV.v.213-14). Where his father, however, was driven by his guilty conscience to talk endlessly about a crusade to the Holy Land, Harry sets his sights on the more practical target of France.

Shakespeare’s depiction of Harry as exclusively focused on war coheres precisely with Machiavelli’s general advice to princes: “A prince, therefore, must not have any other object nor any other thought, nor must he take anything as his profession but war, its institutions, and its discipline; because that is the only profession which befits one who commands…” (*Machiavelli* 1979, 124). Moreover, “Nothing makes a prince more esteemed than great undertakings and examples of his unusual talents” (150-51). Machiavelli offers Ferdinand of Aragon as a paradigm of the virtuous “new prince” because Ferdinand “from being a weak ruler…became, through fame and glory, the first king of Christendom.” The key to his success, according to Machiavelli, was immediately attacking his neighbor (Granada) in order to consolidate his position at home. Further, Machiavelli stresses that “he was able
to maintain armies with money from the church.” A new prince, then, especially one whose own position is problematic, should find a pretext and immediately go to war with a vulnerable neighbor and, if possible, get the church to underwrite the venture.

The strategic character of Harry’s policy of war with France is clearly suggested at the beginning of Henry V, where Shakespeare calls the casus belli into question. Act I, Scene I opens with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely discussing a bill urged in the Commons to confiscate “the better half of [the church’s] possession” (I.i.8). It quickly materializes, however, that the Archbishop has made an offer to the new King “As concerning France” in exchange for his opposition to the bill (I.i.79). To begin with, he has offered a substantial war chest—“a greater sum/Than ever at one time the clergy yet/Did to his predecessor part withal” (I.i.79-81). Moreover, in the following scene, the Archbishop provides Harry with a highly obscure and convoluted justification for his claims to “some certain Dukedoms” in France (I.ii.247). Finally, when Harry cuts through all the verbiage and asks the big question, “May I with right and conscience make this claim?” Canterbury answers pregnantly “The sin upon my head dread sovereign!” (I.ii.96-97). Without any direct exercise of power, Harry gets the church not only to finance his war on his vulnerable neighbor, as Machiavelli recommends, but to take responsibility for it as well. In treating these events, Shakespeare diverges in important details from his historical sources with the apparent intent to suggest that the invasion has been Harry’s plan all along (Holinshed 1974, 64-65; Bullough 1962, 352).

Once Harry’s claim has been confirmed by the country’s highest spiritual authority, he gives admission to the French ambassadors, who deliver the Dauphin’s contemptuous rebuff. When Harry responds with cold fury, his claim has expanded to “my throne of France” (I.ii.275). After this, Harry makes no further mention of the casus belli (although the injustice of the war continues to haunt the play). By the final act, however, Harry openly confesses to Katherine what his intention has been all along: “I will have it all mine” (V.ii.173-76).

All of this emphasis on Harry’s duplicity, however, only reaffirms something that Shakespeare’s audience, indeed any audience who has watched the previous plays, knows—Harry’s claims to the French crown are obviously specious. He is not even the legitimate King of England. This fact gives a deeply ironic truth to Harry’s proud declaration on his disembarkation from Dover, “No king of England, if not king of France!” (II.ii.193).
Shakespeare went to some trouble, then, to cast doubt on
the justness of Harry’s war. Harry needs a war because of his own problem of
legitimacy, and the corresponding threat of the kind of political instability that
plagued his father’s reign, and he senses weakness in France. So he marries
Machiavelli’s advice with an astute political opportunism in a “great enter-
prise” designed to showcase the military talents he had already began to exhibit
at Shrewsbury. Harry then embarks on precisely the bold but realistic martial
policy which Machiavelli champions (Machiavelli 1979, 94, 159-62). Indeed,

once Harry’s strategy becomes clear, one notices how carefully he has stage-

managed the opening court scene (I.ii) to cast himself in the role of the injured
party and to create a credible pretext for war (Sullivan 1996, 135-39;
Spiekerman 2001, 129-31). One notes, for example, that Harry has cannily sent
his peremptory claim to the Dauphin (who is sure to send a disdainful
response) rather than to King Charles who could actually decide its merit. One
also notices Canterbury’s subtle suggestion that Harry has had a chance to
learn the basic content of the French embassy before formally receiving the
ambassadors, and one wonders whether the whole scene is not a meticulously
crafted performance, rather the like the one that he long before practiced with
Falstaff to deceive his father (I Henry IV, II.iv).

Indeed, Shakespeare continuously portrays Harry, through-
out the Henriad, practicing the art of deception, sometimes in a humorous
vein, and sometimes deadly seriously—for example, in 1 Henry IV, II.ii, II.iv,
III.ii, III.iii (so frequently in fact that Vickie Sullivan aptly dubs him
“the Machiavellian Prince of Appearance”: Sullivan 1996, 125). At the end of
the very first scene in which he appears, Harry gives a soliloquy revealing an
elaborate plan to deceive everyone about his (dissolute) character.

Prince: .... By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes,
And like bright metal on a sullen ground
My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off

(I Henry IV, I.ii. 197-215).

In the remaining Henriad, he goes on to realize his plan spectacularly. In this
Harry immediately puts to work Machiavelli’s advice that “a prince who wishes
to accomplish great things must learn to deceive” (Machiavelli 1979, 315).

Moreover, this portrayal of Harry as, in John Blanpied’s words, a “natural
actor,” a “dramatic genius” of manipulation, seems to be entirely Shakespeare’s

own invention (Blanpied 1983, 163; compare Holinshed 1974, 53-62).
According to Machiavelli, the first necessity in consolidating power and preparing the nation for war is to neutralize potential threats to one’s rule. Above all, Machiavelli emphasizes that a new prince of insecure title needs to win the support of the people, for his nobles will tend to “think themselves his equals,” and he will be unable to command them effectively unless he has “popular favor,” in which case he will find “no one or very few, who are not ready to obey him” (Machiavelli 1979, 107-8, 136-38, 158, 376). This too is part of Harry’s plan. He wins the love and trust of the people as the Crown Prince by demonstrating that he is one of them. His youthful slumming mainly takes the form of scandalously associating with the notorious gang of Eastcheap thieves led by his popular friend, “that villainous, abominable misleader of youth,” Sir John Falstaff (II.iv.462-63). Indeed, Harry is introduced to us, and almost exclusively appears in I Henry IV, in Falstaff’s tavern world. By soaking himself, in Frye’s words, “in every social aspect of the kingdom,” Harry “is becoming the entire nation in individual form, which is exactly what a king is” (Frye 1986, 78). In other words, he deliberately creates the bond with his people that a monarch would usually (according to tradition) have by nature. Two quick examples suffice to capture the depth of the love Harry inspires.

At the opening of the Second Act of Henry V we see the remnants of the Eastcheap gang—Bardolph, Nym, Pistol and the Hostess—quarrelling and lamenting over the sudden illness that has struck their leader, Falstaff. The Hostess puts it aptly: “The King has kill’d his heart” (II.i.88). They have good reason to be angry and bitter with Harry, who has cruelly abandoned Falstaff and themselves. Yet, a few lines later we hear,

**Hostess:** Ah, poor heart! He [Falstaff] is so shak’d of a burning quotidian tertian, that it is most lamentable to behold. Sweet men, come to him.

**Nym:** The King hath run bad humors on the knight, that’s the even of it.

**Pistol:** Nym, thou hast spoke the right. His heart is fracted and corroborate.

**Nym:** The King is a good king, but it must be as it may; he passes some humors and careers.

**Pistol:** Let us condole the knight, for, lambkins, we will live. (II.i.118-28)

They care too much for the murderer of Falstaff to blame him.

Again, Harry (in disguise) approaches Ancient Pistol on the night before Agincourt. Harry has seemingly led his army to certain
destruction, and has also just approved the hanging of their mutual old friend, Bardolph, for a minor offence. When, however, Harry turns the conversation to the subject of the King, Pistol declares, “The King’s a bawcock, and a heart of gold,/A lad of life, an imp of fame,/Of parents good, of fist most valiant./I kiss his dirty shoe, and from heart-string/I love the bully boy” (IV.i.44-8). So Harry successfully puts Machiavelli’s advice to work by undertaking an elaborate performance that wins him the hearts of the people, and, by consequence, he controls his nobles: as Westmoreland assures him in the first court scene, “Never King of England/Had nobles richer and more loyal subjects” (I.ii.126-27).

Yet, “since men are a sorry lot,” (“self-serving,” “short-sighted,” gullible, usually “wicked” and treacherous) and love can be fickle, Machiavelli emphasizes that it is even more prudent to be feared than loved (Machiavelli 1979, 86, 95, 123, 131, 134, 181). Fear is especially valuable to a prince because it “will never abandon you” (131). While Machiavelli admits that “it is difficult to join [fear and love] together,” he nonetheless insists that a prince “should like to be both one and the other.” Harry works hard to be feared as well as loved. His justice is harsh (consider the slaughter of the French prisoners he orders at Agincourt, or the hanging of Bardolph), regardless of his personal feelings for the condemned (IV.vi.37-38; III.vi). He always quickly carries through on his threats (the rapid invasion of France, for example), and some of his threats are savage indeed: at Harfleur, for example, he shouts

K. Henry: …. Therefore, you men of Harflew
Take pity of your town and of your people… [i.e., and surrender]
If not—why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
[Defile] the locks of your shrill-shriking daughters;
Your fathers taken by their silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dash’d to the walls;
Your naked infants spitted on pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confus’d
Do break the clouds…. 
What say you? Will you yield, and this avoid?
Or guilty in defense, be thus destroy’d? (III.iii.27-43)

Fortunately, faced with so vivid a prospect, the town surrenders and Harry is not required to carry through this threat. Nonetheless, it is clear that he cultivates fear, both in his enemies and in his own subjects. Cambridge affirms the success of the King in words that directly echo Machiavelli when he insists
“Never was monarch better fear’d and lov’d/Than is your majesty” (II.ii.25-26).

Machiavelli gives further tough advice to the prince “in dealing with his subjects and friends” (Machiavelli 1979, 126). Given the exigencies of politics, a prince must be ready to break his bonds of obligation, even his promises, “when such an observance of faith would be to his disadvantage and when the reasons that made him promise are removed” (134). The single historical incident Machiavelli praises most frequently was Junius Brutus condemning his own children to death when he discovered that they were plotting to overthrow the state (for example, 219, 221, 353, 356). Brutus’ gesture was a powerful expression of a leader’s devotion to the common good. This is exactly what Harry does in the very moments following his coronation. Falstaff has ridden all night to be there for the event, declaring “the laws of England are at my commandment. Blessed are they that have been my friends, and woe to my Lord Chief Justice!” (II Henry IV, V.iii.136-38). He bursts from the crowd at the parade following the coronation, crying “My king, my Jove! I speak to thee my heart!” The King answers,

King:  I know thee not, old man, fall to thy prayers.  
       How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!  
       I have long dreamt of such a kind of man,  
       So surfeit swell’d, so old, and so profane;  
       But being awak’d, I do despise my dream….  
       Reply not to me with a fool-born jest,  
       Presume not that I am the thing I was  
       For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,  
       That I have turn’d away my former self;  
       So will I those that kept me company. (V.v.47-59)

Harry proceeds to banish Sir John ten miles from his presence, and the old knight, publicly rejected, withers and soon dies. The metaphor Harry uses in the last two lines—turning away his former self, banishing it along with his friends—is especially revealing. The image is strikingly echoed in Sigmund Freud’s definition of repression: “The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away and keeping it a distance from the conscious” (Freud 1957, 147). As he becomes king then, Harry rejects a former part of himself, a choice that may prove more psychologically damaging than he realizes. On the other hand, this gesture of public repudiation, more than anything else, persuades the leading nobles that Harry’s conversion is genuine, and earns their trust. So, although Harry’s brutality is emotional rather than physical, and is directed at a father figure rather than a child, the political effect is much the same.
Having then followed Machiavelli’s advice and established his supreme commitment to the public good, and won the love and fear of the people and the loyalty of the nobles, Harry is in a position on his accession to “Assume the port of Mars” and initiate the war that will finally consolidate unity at home and legitimize his dynasty. In undertaking the enterprise, Harry again follows Machiavellian advice (I.i.6). First, he must “ferret out” and “extinguish” any weak links among his powerful subjects who may conspire with the enemy against him (Machiavelli 1979, 80-84, 136-39, 357-74). In particular, Machiavelli recommends that he should scrutinize “those for whom he has done too many favors” (362). Once identified, these enemies should be “annihilated” in one swift sweep, because “injuries … should be inflicted all at the same time, for the less they are tasted, the less they offend” (106-7). Further, when the prince has to make such harsh decisions, he “must delegate distasteful tasks to others; pleasant ones [he] should keep for [him]self” (139). One prominent example will be sufficient to illustrate Harry’s masterful application of these principles.

Even before he leaves Southampton, Harry’s active intelligence uncovers a plot on his life among some of his most favored advisors. It is discovered that Lord Scroop, the Earl of Cambridge and Sir Thomas Grey have accepted bribes from the French to murder their King. Rather than simply arrest them, however, Harry characteristically feigns ignorance and plays an elaborate scene with them in which he proposes to pardon a man accused of speaking abusively of the King. He elicits predictable protests from Scroop, Cambridge and Grey that he is being too merciful. At this point, he reveals his knowledge of their plot, and when they predictably submit themselves to his mercy, he responds “The mercy that was quick in us of late,/By your own counsel is suppress’d and kill’d./You must not dare (for shame) to talk of mercy,/For your own reasons turn into your bosoms,/As dogs upon their masters…” (II.ii.79-83). Harry then condemns them to immediate death. Not only, then, does he uncover and eliminate his enemies among his peers, but he tricks them into taking responsibility for their own merciless dispatch. In essence, he deflects responsibility for their condemnation onto the victims themselves. Indeed, this is the same slight of hand that he employs at Harfleur, when he insists that should the city fail to surrender, they themselves will be “guilty in defense” of the awful reign of “murther, spoil and villainy” he threatens to unleash (III.iii.32; Sullivan 1996, 139-40). Harry then clearly exhibits the Machiavellian wisdom that savage and immediate punishment is necessary, but that responsibility must be deflected elsewhere.
By persistently deflecting responsibility for his harsh decisions, Harry protects the purity of his reputation, particularly in the eyes of his own people. This is no easy task, however, for as Machiavelli teaches, “a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things by which men are considered good, for in order to maintain that state he is often obliged to act against his promise, against charity, against humanity, and against religion” (Machiavelli 1979, 135). This is not, however, a license for unrestrained evil. Machiavelli holds that “as long as possible, he should not stray from the good, but he should know how to enter into evil when necessity commands.” Still, in the eyes of his own people, “he should appear, upon seeing and hearing him, to be all mercy, all faithfulness, all integrity, all kindness, all religion. And there is nothing more necessary than to seem to possess this last quality [i.e., religion].” It is for these reasons that virtu, especially for a new prince, is, in part, an art of deception—a skill in which Harry excels. He is perceived, in the Chorus’s words, as “the mirror of all Christian kings” (II.o.16). Indeed, no king in Shakespeare defers publicly to God half as often as Harry does.

It will come as no surprise that in the actual prosecution of the war, Harry follows Machiavelli’s maxims carefully. In virtually every important respect, then, Harry’s strategy and conduct faithfully reflect Machiavelli’s advice. While this consistent coherence does not prove anything (it might, of course, be purely coincidental), its systematicity provides some grounds for thinking first that Shakespeare was familiar with Machiavelli’s writing, or at least the key points of his actual texts, and second that Shakespeare deliberately presents Harry as an embodiment of Machiavellian virtu. Two brief further points, one textual and one thematic, help to consolidate these suggestions.

The first point concerns two textual elements whose role in the play has long baffled critics: (1) the continual pedantic arguments among the officers, and Captain Fluellen in particular, about “the true disciplines of war,” that is, “the Roman wars,” and (2) the fascination with comparing Harry with the great military leaders of antiquity which continues throughout the campaign (for example, III.ii.72, 58, 81, 96-97, 129, 140).

Fluellen is persistently frustrated that Harry’s army is not able to attain “the disciplines of the pristine wars of the Romans” (III.ii.81-82). Encamped noisily on the eve of Agincourt, for example, he characteristically remonstrates, “if you would take the pains but to examine the wars of Pompey the Great, you shall find, I warrant you, no tiddle taddle nor pibble babble in Pompey’s camp” (IV.i.68-71). During the battle, he pauses, inexplicably, to offer an extended discursive comparison of Harry to Alexander the Great. First, he
spends about thirty lines establishing that both Harry and Alexander were born in towns through which a river ran. He then elaborates a second point of comparison:

Fluellen: If you mark Alexander’s life well, Harry of Monmouth’s life is come after it indifferent well, for there is figures in all things. Alexander, God knows, and you know, in his rages and his furies, and his wraths, and his cholers and his moods, and his displeasures, and his indignations, and also being a little intoxicates in his prains, did, in his ales and his angers, look you, kill his best friend, Clytus.

Gower: Our King is not like him in that; he never kill’d any of his friends.

Fluellen: It is not well done, mark you now, to take the tales out of my mouth, ere it is made and finished. I speak but in figures and comparisons of it: as Alexander kill’d his friend Clytus, being in his ales and his cups; so also Harry Monmouth, being in his right wits, turn’d away the fat knight with the great belly doublet. He was full of jests, and gipes and knaveries, and mocks—I have forgot his name.

Gower: Sir John Falstaff. (IV.vii.31-51)

Fluellen’s untimely meditations are clearly calculated to provide some comic relief and to remind us again of Harry’s betrayal of Falstaff, but the question remains, why does the reminder take this odd pedantic form?

The answer, I suggest, is that these passages ridicule Machiavelli’s distinctive method of learning princely virtue by studying and imitating the great leaders of antiquity. In *The Prince* Machiavelli tells us that “the prince must read histories and in them study the deeds of great men; he must see how they conducted themselves in wars; he must examine the reasons for their victories and for their defeats in order to avoid the latter and to imitate the former, and above all else he must do as some distinguished man before him has done” (Machiavelli 1979, 126). This is of course Machiavelli’s own method and it is his knowledge and skill in this domain (including allusions to both Pompey and Alexander) that he believes gives special value to his work (78). A deliberate reference to Machiavelli then provides a plausible explanation of these many odd passages in the play, and in particular of the introduction of the new character of Fluellen in *Henry V*. This *reductio ad absurdum* of Machiavelli’s method would also support the more general critique outlined in the next section. Such a reference, however, argues not mere familiarity with Machiavelli’s main ideas and method, but also with the
specific texture of his writing.

The second point further reinforces the plays’ concern with Machiavellian politics, not so much at the level of method, but in terms of an astute understanding of Machiavelli’s themes. If, as I have suggested, Shakespeare deliberately presents Harry as an exemplary Machiavellian prince, then a strong case can be made that Shakespeare understands Machiavelli’s work more acutely than other Elizabethan dramatists (or indeed Machiavelli’s prominent critics of the time). Anthony Parel, for example, forcefully shows that Elizabethan dramatists like Marlowe and Jonson, following the dominant scholarship, treat Machiavelli as a coldly amoral teacher of self-aggrandizement through any means necessary—as exemplified, for instance, in the “Machiavelli” who is prologue to Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* or Jonson’s Sir Politic Would-be. These figures, however, reflect meanly truncated readings of Machiavelli (Parel 1972, 22).

In fact, as seen above, Machiavelli insists that princes should never divert from “the good” except “when necessity commands.” He does not deny (amorally) that what necessity may sometimes require is, in fact, evil. Indeed, he roundly condemns those who enter into such evil unnecessarily: “It cannot be called skill to kill one’s fellow citizens, betray one’s friends, be without faith, without pity, and without religion; by these methods one may indeed gain power, but not glory” (Machiavelli 1979, 104).

The critical question for Machiavelli, then, is what kinds of ends or necessities do justify cruel or evil methods. As he puts it, “I believe that this depends on whether cruelty be well or badly used. Well used are those cruelties that are...converted into the greatest possible benefits for the subjects” (Machivelli 1979, 106). Thus, for example, Machiavelli forgives Romulus’ murder of his brother Remus because it was necessary for the foundation and stability of Rome, and its eventual emergence as the greatest Republic that humanity has ever known. In short, the prince should strive to be good, but when public needs demand, his high office obligates him to commit evil for the good of his people.

Harry is Machiavellian not only in his political strategies, but also in the deeper sense that the evils he does serve pressing public purposes. After all, his great projects of conquering France, politically unifying England, and securing his own Lancastrian line on the throne are all seemingly in the English public interest. Indeed, the brutal insurrections and repressions that characterized his father’s reign, and the savage civil wars of his son’s, show how
necessary Harry’s project of legitimation and unification is for England. In short, Harry’s Machiavellian policy serves patriotic ends. As Herschel Baker has acutely observed, “We see Harry at his best, in fact, when he fulfils his patriotic function,” for example as General, inspiring the indomitable English against their traditional French enemy: “On, on, you [noblest] English,/Whose blood is fæt from fathers of war-proof!” (III.i.17-18; Baker 1974, 933). He is probably most memorable facing the “fearful odds” at Agincourt:

For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile…  
And gentlemen in England, now a-bed,  
Shall think themselves accurs’d they were not here;  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin’s day. (IV.iii.56-67)

In so forcefully depicting Harry as a realistic patriot, capable of powerful manipulation (and even evil) in pursuit of public ends, Shakespeare represents Machiavelli’s ideal of political virtu more compellingly than any playwright (or critic) of the period. This achievement argues not only a familiarity, but indeed a deep understanding of Machiavelli’s most famous text. The question I want to turn to now is what Shakespeare shows us about this Machiavellian political virtu.

III. Shakespeare’s Critique of Machiavelli: How Harry is Eaten by the Crown

In this final section I want to draw attention to how Shakespeare portrays the human effect of Machiavellian political virtu, particularly on Harry’s character. In Act IV, Scene V of II Henry IV, Harry describes himself symbolically remonstrating his father’s crown for what it has done to the old man: “The care of thee depending/Hath fed upon the body of my father;/Therefore thou best of gold are [worst of] gold./... thou... Hast eat thy bearer up” (158-64). Here Harry is not only perceptive about his father’s fate, but anticipates his own. He will be consumed by his crown, and with his death his project will collapse.

In essence, the Henriad is dominated by two intertwined stories. The first is the story of Harry’s process of maturation into a great King who unifies a factionalized England in a glorious war of conquest. In this project, Harry is, as the poet W.B. Yeats observed, “as remorseless and undistinguished as some natural force” (Yeats 1907, 63). It is not just the relentless force of Harry’s performance that attracts attention, but the degree to
which he himself, his personality, is subsumed (and therefore “undistinguished”) within it.

Yeats adds the following remark which points to the second and countervailing element of the play: “the finest thing in his play is the way his old companions fall out of it brokenhearted or on their way to the gallows.” In contrast with the spectacle of kingly greatness, Shakespeare quietly but persistently points to the terrible cost of Harry’s kind of political virtu—most obviously for his former friends, but also implicitly for his people, and for his own inner life. Shakespeare allows us fewer glimpses into Harry’s inner life as the cycle proceeds, but what we do see (and can infer) reveals a man with a heart that is as “fracted and corroborate” as Falstaff’s on his deathbed.

The relationship between these two aspects of Harry’s character can be more precisely described in the language of medieval and renaissance political theology which Shakespeare often employs—specifically, the two bodies of the King. As E. H. Kantorowicz memorably observed, the king at the time was held not only to have the same individual or “natural” body as other persons, but also a second “body politic” or sometimes “sacramental” or “ceremonial” body, encompassing the entire nation (Kantorowicz 1957, 1-24). A king, in short, is both a unique individual person, and at the same time all of his countrymen rolled into one. What Harry means when he charges his father’s crown with consuming him is that his ceremonial body as King, symbolized by the crown, has overtaxed his individual, natural body, and left it a spent husk. At the end, as Frye summarizes, Henry IV is “perpetually exhausted and he can’t sleep” (Frye 1986, 80). His body is a frail and wasted wreck.

Harry’s hope for avoiding his father’s fate is two-fold. First, having merely succeeded to an usurper’s crown, his own legitimacy may be easier to maintain than his father’s. Second, he hopes to succeed in the project that his father could never quite get off the ground (distracted as he was by rebellions)—a major foreign war that will unify the nation and legitimate his dynasty. To this task he bends all of his extraordinary political virtu, carefully following Machiavelli’s dictums. In the end, however, his hopes are forlorn, and despite all his political virtuosity, and even his remarkable military victory, we watch the same process of the gradual exhaustion of individual persona set in, although more subtly than in his father’s case. Finally, in the Epilogue of Henry V we hear that Harry soon collapses and, as Shakespeare’s stage “oft showed,” his kingdom loses France, degenerates into civil war, and bleeds. His son will be the last and most disastrous Lancastrian King.
How then does Shakespeare subtly show Harry’s consumption by the crown? In assessing Harry’s inner life, we must rely on inference, for as we progress through the Henry plays, he becomes increasingly reluctant to speak directly to the audience. In *I Henry IV*, Harry immediately makes the audience co-conspirators by informing them confidentially of his plans, and later of his various practical jokes on Falstaff. In *Henry V*, however, Harry gives only one soliloquy, on the eve of the battle of Agincourt. In fact, as Harry ages, he becomes, in Harold Bloom’s words, increasingly “veiled,” so that by *Henry V*, “Shakespeare does not let us locate Harry/Henry V’s true self” (H. Bloom 1998, 323). Indeed, it may be that Harry’s “true self” is gradually ceasing to be there at all, progressively subsumed, as Matthew Wikander suggests, by his public, ceremonial function (Wikander 1993, 298-99).

The first and probably the most important blow to Harry’s personal identity is struck before *Henry V* opens, although it resonates through the play—the rejection of Falstaff, a betrayal of which Shakespeare continually reminds the audience. The tavern sub-plot, for example, is concerned through the end of the second act with Falstaff’s off-stage death, culminating in the Hostess’s affecting report of his last minutes (II.iii.9-26). The King’s responsibility is continually emphasized. It is also significant that this report is directly preceded by the scene revealing Harry’s own betrayal by his close confidant, Lord Scroop, and portraying Harry’s towering rage at this infidelity (II.ii). One cannot help but suspect that Harry’s long, impassioned denunciation of Scroop as a “cruel/ingrateful, savage and inhuman creature” is prompted in part by his own troubled conscience (94-95). Shakespeare never allows Harry or the audience to entirely forget, even in the flights of patriotic rhetoric, that Harry’s plan has from the beginning been premised on the murderous betrayal of his friends, and indeed of the man he was before he became king. It is from the twin point of royal accession and betrayal that he becomes, like his father, “inscrutable” and isolated (Frye 1986, 63-64). Although admired by his lords, for example, none is very close to Harry, and certainly none know his plans or the worries of his inner mind. As he tells the loyal Erpingham before his soliloquy, “I and my bosom must debate a while/And then I would no other company” (IV.i.31-32).

No doubt, some of Harry’s reticence to share his thoughts is motivated by the volatile knowledge that is at the center of his plans: the war with France is an unjust one motivated by his need to promote unity and to establish the legitimacy of his dynasty. His one policy then, while patriotic, is also deeply sinful. The responsibility he bears for the unjust war is expressed to him in rather terrifying terms when he walks in disguise among his troops on
the eve of Agincourt, trying to boost morale. A soldier, Michael Williams, observes,

But if the cause [of war] be not good, the King himself hath a heavy
reckoning to make, when all those legs, and arms, and heads,
chopp’d off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all,
“We died at such a place”—some swearing, some crying for a
surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon
the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left…. Now, if
these men do no die well, it will be a black matter for the King that
led them to it…. (IV.i.134-45)

Harry, of course, disagrees, but he does not for a moment
challenge the premise of the unjustness of the war. He tries, rather feebly, to
deny his responsibility for the deaths of his soldiers even if the cause be wrong.
He suggests that Williams’ argument is tantamount to charging a father with
wickedness if a son he sends on a merchant voyage “sinfully miscarries” at sea
(148). However, the argument is obviously flawed since in Harry’s father/son
case the sinful error is imputed to the son, whereas in Williams’ king/soldier
case it is the King who initiated an unjust war and caused the soldier’s death.
Indeed, according to Harry’s own logic, if the voyage itself is sinful, then
responsibility should rest with the father/king (Lane 1994, 61-67). Moreover,
Harry seems to recognize the weakness of this argument for he quickly shifts to
an alternate line, calling war “[God’s] beadle … his vengeance” wherein “men
are punished for before-breech of the King’s laws…” (IV.i.169-71). In short,
war is the means by which God executes men at least some of whom are guilty
of former, unprosecuted crimes. Evidently, this is even less convincing than the
first argument. Whatever rationalizations he gives his soldiers, then, the war
and its corpses and cripples remain a black matter for his conscience, and he
knows it, but it is a guilt he cannot so much as acknowledge. Under the protec-
tion of his disguise, however, he is at least able, when asked if he thinks the King
is afraid, to articulate something of his delicate position. He tells his soldiers,
“I think the King is but a man, as I am…. all his senses have but human
conditions. His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man…..
Therefore when he sees reason of fear, as we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the
same relish as ours are; yet in reason, no man should possess him with any
appearance of fear, lest he, by showing it, should dishearten his army”
(IV.i.101-12). He can neither be told of the true desperation of their situation,
nor can he show the natural fear that should accompany it (nor the heavy guilt
he bears). His responsibilities require deceptions, which leave his “true self”
wholly isolated, with terrible burdens to carry.
Where we get the clearest glimpse into the King’s inner life is in his one soliloquy in *Henry V*, on the eve of Agincourt, the only time we see Harry alone in the play. Hopelessly outnumbered, his army exhausted and sick, he finally takes a moment to escape from his continual performance of the role of king. So what then does Harry tell us in this single moment of intimacy? He speaks passionately and at length about the draining weight of his *ceremonial* role virtuously performed, and he reveals that he is suffering from his father’s fatal illness—he cannot sleep:

> Upon the King! let us our lives, our souls,  
> Our debts, our careful wives,  
> Our children, and our sins lay on the King!  
> We must bear all. O hard condition,  
> Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath  
> Of every fool whose sense no more can feel  
> But his own wringing! What infinite heart’s ease  
> Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!  
> And what have kings, that privates have not too,  
> Save ceremony, save general ceremony?  
> And what art thou, thou idle Ceremony?...  
> [he condemns the emptiness of ceremony for some twenty lines]  
> No, thou proud dream,  
> That play’st so subtilly with a king’s repose.  
> I am a king that find thee; and I know…  
> [he dismisses the symbols of his ceremonial office for six lines]  
> No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,  
> Not all these, laid in bed majestical,  
> Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave;  
> [he longingly praises the restorative power of sleep for sixteen lines] *(IV.i.230-84)*

This glimpse into Harry’s soul confirms what the remainder of the play suggests—that Harry is under enormous physical and emotional strain precipitated by the relentless demands of his project of self-legitimation. He is exhausted, but he cannot sleep. He feels his life being reduced to empty ceremony. He yearns for the “heart’s ease” he knew briefly in the common life at Eastcheap. Yet, at bottom, he knows that he himself is responsible for (or complicit in) the choices that have demolished the quality of his life, as he goes on to indicate.

After a brief interruption by Erpingham, he continues, now in the form of a prayer.

> O God of battles, steel my soldiers’ hearts,  
> Possess them not with fear! ….  

Not to-day, O Lord,
O, not to-day, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!
I Richard's body have interred new,
And on it have bestowed more contrite tears,
Than from it issued forced drops of blood.
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
Who twice a day their wither'd hands hold up
Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built
Two chauntries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do;
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon. (IV.i.289-305)

His prayer ends in despair. Harry's mind is drawn inevitably back to the unsettled crime which underlies his whole regime, and which has given rise to his whole long history of deception and personal betrayals—Richard II's usurpation and murder. This is the first and only time that he speaks of the crime. At first, he appeals weakly to the care he has shown Richard's remains, but hired mourners can hardly expiate the crime, and he knows it. He is trying to buy forgiveness without real penitence, which would entail at very least public recognition of the crime, if not renunciation of his ill-gotten position. Otherwise, he is just "imploring pardon," not repenting. His prayers are, therefore, "nothing worth."

Of course, were he simply to acknowledge his father's crime he might very well set off the same cycle of rebellions that plagued his father's reign and will make England bleed during his son's. Insofar as he adopts the duties of regency, Harry could plausibly argue that he has a patriotic duty not to acknowledge the crime and endanger the kingdom to ease his own conscience. This duty goes with the ceremonial role of king. That is certainly Machiavelli's line. The Machiavellian rationale of patriotic ends does not, however, relieve Harry's spirit. It may wash the crime and all that follows it out of the ceremonial body, but it cannot lift it from the natural man; it cannot give him "heart's ease."

Harry admits this dilemma to himself and then continues to prosecute his war, leading his tiny, bedraggled army against the vast French host. He wins a miraculous victory, but framed by his soliloquy and the Epilogue's report of the ultimate failure of his project of establishing the Lancastrian line, it rapidly becomes clear that the victory does not free Harry—quite the opposite.
The final Act of the play illustrates the complete consumption of Harry’s personal identity by his regal function. The central action of the Act is Harry’s courting of the French Princess Katherine. The action reveals that even Harry’s “love” and marriage are mere instruments of grand strategy, formal ceremonials, without real feeling or intimacy. Of course, Katherine has already been won by right of conquest, as Harry reminds everyone in attendance: “Yet leave our cousin Katherine here with us:/She is our capital demand, compris’d/Within the fore-rank of our articles” (ii.95-97). As soon as they are alone (except for Katherine’s maid, Alice), Harry peremptorily declares his love, and asks for hers in return. Language, however, emerges as a barrier, for Katherine speaks no English, and her maid little more. Harry is immediately driven to impatience. He reminds her pointedly that he is the conqueror of France, so that in marrying him she would become its queen (and England’s)—and at any rate, that she has little choice. Their union is a political necessity. He tries again:

Henry: But, Kate, dost thou understand thus much English?
      Canst thou love me?
Kath.: I cannot tell.
Henry: Can any of your neighbours tell, Kate? I’ll ask them.
      Come, I know thou lovest me… (192-97)

Finally, the lady relents. If it will “please” her father, it will “also content [her]” (247, 250). There is no love offered here and none given. Harry’s long loneliness of command then is rewarded by a wife who cannot love, nor even understand him. The one thing which, if genuine, might actually render his tormented isolation bearable is precisely what is denied to him, and transformed into that which he most hates, “idle ceremony,” and a rather brusque one at that.

The play then ends with a final pregnant juxtaposition. Harry ceremonially recognizes Kate as his queen and prays that their marriage and realms “prosp’rous be” (374). He is immediately followed by the Chorus who reminds us that they will most emphatically not be. Harry lived but “small time,” and his infant son, crowned Henry VI, “lost France, and made his England bleed” (Epilogue 5, 12). Shakespeare does not explicitly connect the dots for us, but he lays them out neatly enough, and even more clearly for his historical audience, who knew well that Harry collapsed and died on campaign, “prematurely aged,” mere months after his victory at Agincourt, still trying to pacify France (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2005). In short, Harry, like
his Machiavellian father, drove himself to exhaustion and death in pursuit of legitimacy, consumed by the demands of his crown. It is no coincidence, from the perspective of Shakespeare’s critique, that Machiavelli’s own quintessentially virtuous prince, Cesare Borgia, is similarly struck down young by an untimely illness (unfortunately, just at the moment his father, Pope Alexander IV, also succumbed to exhaustion and illness), and his political project collapsed (Machiavelli 1979, 100-103). In fact, few of Machiavelli’s heroes, including Alexander, live to enjoy their triumphs. For Machiavelli, these are fickle turns of fortune. Shakespeare, however, suggests a more prosaic explanation, the limits of what human beings can bear.

So, through Harry’s life and performance, Shakespeare provides a critique of Machiavelli’s political thought. He is not satisfied, like most critics of the day, condemning Machiavelli’s immorality. Instead, he illustrates historically that the demands of sustained political virtu—the continuous deception and manipulation, the subordination of friendship and love to the burdens of state, the inability to recognize and redress the crimes of the past, the insatiable demands of a statecraft of war for self-legitimation—are in the end too much even for the ideal Machiavellian prince to sustain. No man can live without a life of his own. Machiavellian virtu consumes life, and reduces it to idle ceremony. Shakespeare illustrates, in short, that Machiavelli’s prince is a psychological impossibility.

In illustrating the limits of human nature, Shakespeare draws attention to a major internal tension in Machiavelli’s writing. Machiavelli insists that human nature is fickle, short-sighted and self-serving, and then proceeds to make enormous demands of a prince, especially a new prince (and especially in a corrupt society): he must monopolize power, isolate himself, continuously deceive his subjects, commit sins and betrayals as necessary, and otherwise sacrifice himself to the long-term public good (Machiavelli 1979, 127, 134, 200, 223, 277). Yet the prince is no less human than his subjects. How then can such virtu be a reasonable expectation? Moreover, even if a prince of ideal virtu somehow appears, how could he follow Machiavelli’s advice without twisting his own nature and imposing terrible hardships on his own people (such as wars of conquest)? Shakespeare suggests that such a course is likely to be self-destructive. Finally, even if a prince were to accomplish all that Machiavelli demands, would all his success not depend on the wildly unlikely contingency of an equally fortunate succession? And otherwise, would legitimacy not soon collapse after the virtuous prince did? For all these reasons, Shakespeare seems to suggest, legitimacy cannot be manufactured by princely
virtu alone, but must arise, if it is to prove durable, in some way consistent with the traditional moral foundations of a society. Read this way, *Henry V* reinforces rather than disrupts the main crime-punishment-expiation theme of the historical cycle.

In the centuries since the composition of *Henry V*, the first question posed in the last paragraph has become a mainstay of Machiavelli criticism (for example, Anglo 1969, 202-9; Parel 1972, 45-57, 59-67, 84-85). The second question, and especially its psychological aspect on which Shakespeare particularly focuses, has also gained credibility. The modern science of psychology, for example, today stresses the damage to ego integrity produced by repression and continual performance of adopted social roles (see Murray 1996, 103-45). Individuals need refuge simply to be themselves among others. They require recognition from, and genuine exchange with, others. These basic human needs stand as an important justification of contemporary liberal-constitutional politics which carve out a protected space for the private individual and his/her relationships through the provision of guaranteed civil rights and the limitation of governmental authority. If, however, Shakespeare was setting the foundations of this argument over four hundred years ago in the course of showing that Machiavelli, the famed political realist, was not realistic enough, it becomes difficult to deny him a rightful place in the history of political thought. On the other hand, it becomes very easy to make the case that the political ideas developed in his plays warrant more rigorous and sustained attention.

**References**

(References to Shakespeare’s plays are drawn from the *Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974.)


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