

Interpretation

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The opening paragraph of “The Poet as Teacher of Statesmen,” the introduction to *The Soul of Statesmanship*, is a fitting place to begin: “This volume joins a growing chorus of scholars who approach Shakespeare as a political thinker. Its authors—drawing upon expertise in fields such as political philosophy, American government, and law—explore how Shakespeare’s plays dramatize perennial questions about human nature, moral virtue, and statesmanship, and demonstrate that reading them as works of philosophical literature enhances our understanding of political life” (xi). The editors place these essays in the tradition of humanistic politics, and gesture to Tocqueville, Burke, Lincoln, and Twain as thinkers and writers sensitive to Shakespeare’s deep and substantive engagement with political problems. Indeed, they go so far as to claim that “the Bard was, and remains, our political teacher as Homer and Virgil were said to have been the political teachers of the Greeks and Romans” (xii).

The volume’s nine essays divide neatly into three each on Shakespeare’s tragedies, comedies, and histories. Part 1, “Tragedy and the Folly of the Ruler,” includes essays by Timothy Burns (“One That Loved Not Wisely but Too Well: Devotional Love and Politics in *Othello*”), Carson Holloway (“Macbeth: The Spiritual Drama of the Tyrannical Soul”), and L. Joseph Hebert (“Wings as Swift as Love: *Hamlet* and the Virtues (and Vices) of the King”). Part 2, “Comedy and the Reign of Wisdom,” includes essays by Denise Schaeffer and Mary P. Nichols (“Both False and True: Love, Death, and Poetry in *Love’s*

Labour's Lost"), Thomas Vincent Svogun ("Jurisprudence in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*"), and Luigi Bradizza ("Christian Ethics and Political Moderation in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*"). Part 3, "History and Rule as the Measure of Statesmen," includes essays by Khalil M. Habib ("The Bastard in *King John*; or, On the Need for a Unified English Nation"), Joseph Alulis ("To Make High Majesty Look Like Itself: Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the Nature of the Good Regime"), and David Alvis ("This Blessed Plot: Divine Justice and Law from *Richard II*'s Trial by Combat to *Henry V*'s Battle of Agincourt").

"Soul of Statesmanship" is a striking title choice. It suggests a search for the essence of ruling, the virtues or actions of genuine statesmen over against lackluster rulers or tyrants. But it also suggests an interest in the soul of the ruler, his or her interior life (and, as all of these authors acknowledge, his or her eternal life). Though this distinction is not an explicit structuring element, each essay considers the "soul" of statesmanship sometimes in the first sense and sometimes in the second. Ultimately, each implies that if we are to understand fully the essence of ruling, we must adequately consider the inner, eternal life of the ruler.

The essays on Shakespeare's tragedies emphasize the classical understanding of tyranny: "rule by one for his own advantage and not for the common good" (24). According to Burns, Iago extends this principle of selfish self-regard to all individuals, so that the tyrant is simply what any of us would be if given the chance—every life masks an overriding "hidden but ever operative self-interest" (16). If Iago is right, our public face is a mask for our selfish souls, and we should not be surprised if politics, and our personal relationships, can be reduced to the pursuit of private gain. On this reading, the tragedy of Othello is that he accepts Iago's cynicism enough to distrust and then condemn those he loves best. For Holloway, Macbeth is the classic tyrant and, as Xenophon argues in the *Hiero*, the one who suffers most under tyranny is the tyrant himself. And since Shakespeare gives Macbeth, more than once, the opportunity to repent, "the full extent of the tragic protagonist's loss" is "the apparent loss of his soul" (33). Hebert argues that Hamlet tragically fails to love self, neighbor, and God, and that these three loves "ought to govern both states and men" (38). Hamlet fails because he lacks the *caritas* necessary to heal the troubles besetting the state. Hamlet therefore in the end imitates his uncle's tyrannous behavior, since he cares most about "grasping for petty, private, and hateful forms of revenge" (51). He dies unrepentant, and this death, a result of his own perverse desire to die

and so a failure of self-love, leaves Denmark with nothing but a “foul, strange, and unnatural” silence (53).

In general, the goodness of the soul is the final criterion of a good life, and hence also the final criterion of good statesmanship. This makes statesmanship a demanding enterprise: straightforward self-interest is replaced by something more complex, leaders must keep in mind their eternal destiny, and *caritas* is necessary for the good ruler. But the essays on Shakespeare’s comedies remind us that while the soul makes statesmanship more demanding, in another sense it makes it less so. Svogun argues that *The Merchant of Venice* systematically exposes the problems of a positivist legal framework. Appeals to the natural (or moral) law, the law of the soul, must supplement and sometimes overturn positive and instrumental contractual law (often enough by softening its hard, unyielding edges). It is not enough that Bassanio wins the lottery; he must also ask Portia’s consent. Shylock’s contract with Antonio is not self-interpreting; Portia demonstrates that individuals can use that same formalism “to defeat the lawmaker’s will or in this instance the will of an individual who invokes the power of the sovereign to enforce a contract he entered into” (89–90).

Bradizza’s analysis of *Measure for Measure* likewise appeals to the moral realities of the soul to soften the potentially harsh realities of positive law. Strikingly, in this play the source of the legal demandingness in Vienna is itself the perfection demanded by the moral law. Angelo thinks the state should pursue the perfect virtue of its citizens. Isabella observes the obvious failings of the state and concludes that withdrawal to the convent is her only choice. The Duke rejects both forms of harshness: the punishment appropriate for the incontinent is marriage rather than death, and his broader intention is to “bring about moral behavior but to continue to permit sinful thoughts. Vienna is to be a continent but not necessarily virtuous city” (106). Even though the divine law demands perfection, the state can judge only external behavior because none of us has perfect knowledge of our inner states (including of course our own). Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the statesman who would be true to the moral law must be merciful.

Schaeffer and Nichol’s consideration of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* elegantly highlights the tension between the hardness and softness of the moral law and so also the relationship between justice and mercy in the good statesman. In this play, “whereas the men appear charming but frivolous and unreliable, the more serious women represent social order and the embodied limitations of the human condition” (59). The play invites us to see a fruitful balance

between these two tendencies, between the Spring and Winter represented in the final pageant at the end of the play: we must all of us recognize that “the constraints of human life exist alongside its joys” (75). Our souls should make us serious, since they are serious things and demand that we bend always towards our death and the reward we should hope for in heaven. And our souls should make us joyful, since they are beautiful things given to us by God who means for us to celebrate them and to live fully, even playfully, in the present moment.

The essays on Shakespeare’s English history plays reveal the interplay of these broader theoretical claims in the development of the English nation. Habib, for example, argues that King John “acts as an unaccountable God” (124) and believes himself subject to neither “church [n]or earthly authority and that England is his to do with as he pleases” (123). Philip Falconbridge, the bastard son of Richard I, develops a patriotism that “embodies a unique combination of both Christian and political instincts and might well be Shakespeare’s way of showing us what a model king and citizen ought to look like” (124). This patriotism, a love of his homeland “that serves as a newly found source of a standard for society” that “can serve as a guide to virtuous action,” is subordinated to a “moral compass that informs his sense of duty for the common good” (and so subordinate also to the divine law) (136).

Alulis’s essay on *Richard II* emphasizes a balance between the divine and human by showing us a ruler who fails to achieve it. Richard II’s claim to absolute rule is connected to his sacramental understanding of his anointing, and “complete submission to a king” is justified as a “vehicle of grace” and “aid to virtue” (148). But his own actions (principally the confiscation of Bolingbroke’s property) show that Richard does not measure up to his own ideals. The tragedy of the play is that Richard II “unworthily claimed title to rule in the best regime, rule by one of superhuman virtue” (154).

One might think that the appropriate response to *Richard II* would be to temper one’s superhuman ideals, but Alvis’s essay on the second tetralogy argues otherwise. Like Shaeffer and Nichols, Alvis emphasizes the inherent tension between the human and the divine in politics. We are neither angels nor beasts, and each should balance the demands of the other in recognition of our twofold nature. “The demise of Richard [II] marks the end of England’s medieval political order and the divine right theory of kingship. In the place of divine right emerges a political universe that is devoid of theologically significant ceremonies and political institutions” (166). What follows is an endless series of wars among the nobles under the reign of Henry IV,

proving “that brute strength only invites further contests of force” (169). Even if the king and nobles were good in the natural sense, “law and virtue are only truly efficacious when human beings think that they are sanctioned by divine authority” (176). Henry V recognizes that he must satisfy the temporal demands of the ruled while also placing his authority within a supernatural context. At the battle of Agincourt, and in particular through the Saint Crispin’s Day speech, Henry locates their earthly success within God’s providential order (rather than the divine right of the ruler), and thereby justifies the place of the English nation (and his own kingship) within European politics.

Any review is woefully selective, and a review of nine independent essays even more so. But I hope I have conveyed the underlying unity present in *The Soul of Statesmanship*, as well as its sustained interest in the complexities of the soul in the political order. I warmly recommend them to all those interested (and honestly, all of us *should* be interested) in the power and promise of humanistic politics.

