

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2022

Volume 48 Issue 2

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Michael Platt, *Mighty Opposites: Machiavelli and Shakespeare Match Wits*. Privately published, 2021, 118 pp., \$20.00 (paper).

WILL MORRISEY

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What if playwrights Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) and William Shakespeare (1564–1616) had met, corresponded, even conversed, thanks to the Florentine’s acquisition of the Makropulos Elixir, mixed by the court alchemist of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II—a potion imagined by still another playwright, Karel Čapek (1890–1938), granting those who drink it a long-extended life? And what if Shakespeare wrote an unfinished dialogue based on the encounter, completed by his fellow player and trusted friend, Nicholas Tooley? (After all, did not a promising young Plato scholar named Seth Benardete once muse, “Shakespeare could have written dialogues,” to the delight of his teacher, Leo Strauss?) Michael Platt has imagined it so, bringing together “the founder of modern political philosophy” with “the greatest modern poet” in a book animated by the question, can there be a Christian prince?

The year is 1598. Machiavelli is secretary of state for the “Right, Risen, Roman Republic,” having inspired the unification of northern Italy under a regime that has built itself into a naval power in the Mediterranean. He is on a diplomatic mission in England, perhaps to counter Spain, which still controls the Kingdom of Naples. Always looking to enlist “new captains in his unarmed army,” he also seeks an alliance with Shakespeare, whose writings surpass Machiavelli’s own works (Machiavelli admits to himself) in beauty. “In spiritual warfare nothing is more effectual,” and in his declared war on the regnant form of spirituality, Christianity, “the greatest calumny on life,” Machiavelli can use all the allies he can get. Having read Shakespeare’s Roman plays, he detects, or supposes he detects, a potential officer.

Shakespeare replies to Machiavelli's self-written letter of introduction, pleased with the Florentine's flattering but true observation that Shakespeare writes both tragedy and comedy. He invites Machiavelli to attend performances of his *Richard III* and his three plays on Henry VI. He also recommends that Machiavelli read and reread them.

In due course, Machiavelli replies, observing that the English plays complement the Roman plays, with their shared themes of honor and calumny, the violence of political founding, and civil disorder. He is quick to spot a new source of controversy in modern England, "the new division of Christianity" between Catholics and Protestants. He criticizes monarchic regimes because they are dynastic: since "most families are awful to grow up in," "why give rule of public things to a family," which only "magnifies vices more than virtues"? It may be that he brings these themes together, with an eye on the "family" seen in the Trinity. "I do see, howbeit faintly, the coming of a better regime," as the English people exhibit the capacity to discern virtue in their rulers and demand justice when those rulers commit crimes. "Would that their common sense were instituted in a stronger Commons, and if a ruling circle sprang up in it."

Shakespeare concurs with some of this. "How could I not study disorder? After all, there is so much of it. And it is always waiting to rush in. All it takes is one generation to lose the good times, and then slide on to worse," although "in the worst of times, when all seems lost, a rebound occurs," often beginning, as Machiavelli hopes, "with the people." As to Shakespeare's downplaying of Parliament, he calls Machiavelli's attention to the theater in which he puts on his plays. It "give[s] the audience the experience of an ideal Parliament in eternal session, in which all the important features of a political situation, together with their connection to everything above and below politics, are brought into speech, so that deliberation about the nation, sometimes even about the world, goes on in the mind of the audience, as it should in Parliament, in the Privy Council, in the Monarch, and in the soul of every English man facing his public choices"—more than only a Parliament but a mixed regime, consisting of both aristocrats and commoners, "all drawn together in our Theatre, and by my theatre, all made into one audience, all laughing, weeping, trembling, cheering together, and accordingly understanding," in what is now nearly a modern commercial "nation-state." He concludes by wondering if, even with a commercial way of life, men "can live together who do not worship together, as Jew and Christian do not, or at least look up to something beautiful and lofty together?" Where Machiavelli

envied the beauty of Shakespeare's literary style, his art, Shakespeare himself considers beauty in nature, and perhaps in God.

In their next exchange of letters, Machiavelli begins by condemning the conspicuously Christian Henry VI, who "wishes to be loved not feared" and is rewarded only with contempt. Indeed, on further consideration, Machiavelli concludes that Henry wants to be loved only by God, remaining indifferent to the love, the hate, and even the contempt of his fellow men, a ruler who "puts himself above politics" even to the extent of restoring titles and estates to his dynastic enemy, Richard Plantagenet. Unfitted for war, Henry never played sports, practiced with weapons, or learned horsemanship; for Machiavelli, "horse" means warfare and, given Richard's famous battlefield cry, "My kingdom for a horse!"—a line that will reappear for further discussion later—Machiavelli is rehearsing his theme from *The Prince*, that princes of war must replace princes of peace. With "reviling relish," Machiavelli lists Henry's many "sins of political omission," from his failure to defend his (few) political friends (especially his failure to protect his Lord Protector, Duke Humphrey) to his failure as a royal husband to punish his foreign-born queen for her infidelity. "All these omissions add up to omitting to rule," to leaving rule of human things to the wisdom and power of God and His providence.

Shakespeare largely concurs with this analysis, while cautioning against taking it too far. "I have qualified our contempt" for Henry. He may not know horses, "but, surprise, he knows hawking," a sport that figures in his comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which "my hawker Petruchio gentles a mature wild female, named Kate, and with the same means" a falconer would use, "deprivation of sleep and meat." Moreover, Henry "never had the benefit of a father," only "the image of his great father," Henry V—"in everyone's mind for comparison"—and a "nefarious uncle" as his tutor. The "ever-widening span" between young Henry's "sight and his might makes him something like a Fool in court," seeing and saying things impermissible to others but unable to act, "or even to take care of himself." Rulers do need toughness—"not all the anointment in Christendom can change a soul never born to rule"—but Henry does have compassion for his people, and this is what leads to his "one political success," his quelling of a popular rebellion "through clemency and through the recollection of his father." Shakespeare adds, tellingly, "No wonder you missed it; clemency is not a trick of the fox." More, we see that while Machiavelli blames Henry's incapacity on Christianity, Shakespeare attributes that incapacity to the king's nature. This allows Shakespeare to judge him with clemency, as Machiavelli does not and will not.

That last rapier thrust induces Machiavelli to pull back, offering a qualification of his own. "Not that too much vice is virtuous," he cautions, criticizing Henry's queen, Margaret, for her excessive "spirit of revenge." After all, "murder must have a purpose," a political purpose; "she is all fury, no cunning." But here, too, Shakespeare points to a certain subtlety Machiavelli overlooks. Margaret is "not all revenge." When Henry banishes her lover, "we see some tenderness in her, howsoever adulterous," and when her son is stabbed in front of her, "we feel as she feels," never having "expected to suffer with her." "Often that happens in my works. Suddenly someone who could have hardened into a profile, even a cartoon, shows another side or feature, or a downright about-face. As you get to know human beings that happens. As you get to know yourself, that happens." Platt follows Shakespeare's lead here, even as he has Shakespeare deliver that lesson; just when it seemed that the exchange between the two men might turn into a simple battle of wits, he has Shakespeare offer the childless older man some fatherly advice.

There is a larger moral and political problem that Machiavelli also does not see. If Duke Humphrey attempted to overthrow Henry, "as his wife and you urge," he would no longer be himself, no longer "the man we rightly... think most fit of all the magnates to be a king." That is, "he would lose his eligibility in our eyes, and as important, his worthiness in his own eyes." As Plato's Socrates argues, "the same virtue that makes a man best for an office excludes him," the one "most worthy to rule, the philosopher, is least interested in doing so." A ruler by the apparently natural but actually conventional right of heredity may therefore be preferable to the ruler by the natural right of virtue. After all, so many persons suppose themselves naturally fitter to rule than whoever it is that wears the crown. To make partly invisible, counterfeitable virtue the criterion for ruling in practice would be to invite endless civil disorder. Better that the wise man advise the king, serve as Lord Protector, guarding him against such enemies as Humphrey's ambitious wife and the ever-conniving Cardinal Winchester. "It is ambition within bound and in service of the good that is to be lauded, not the over-reaching acquisitiveness you urge in recommending Humphrey seize the Crown, or the infinity of it you desire. That way madness in the soul lies, and chaos in the state."

After Richard Plantagenet's son Edward kills Henry's capable son, also named Edward, on the battlefield, and his ally Gloucester murders Henry (by then Edward's prisoner in the Tower of London), England is left with a king whose sexual desires lead him into an injudicious marriage. Machiavelli sniffs, "The lust of Edward IV unfitted him to be a prince." More politic

choices had been available. Upon reading this, Shakespeare thinks, “Though in your *Prince* you warn not to touch the women, in your plays you teach every man to ‘touch’ all he can.” For you, Machiavelli, “neither fortune nor woman can resist man,” but in the world you envision there can be no stable families to uphold the city. “Families start with sight not touch, with the ardent looks of the young, of Romeo and Juliet.” “Machiavelli in love, impossible.” And so Machiavelli makes the first genuinely political relationship, the reciprocal rule of husband and wife, also impossible. If Machiavelli were ever to watch *Romeo and Juliet*, “I’m afraid he’d set himself to teach one lover to murder the other, and thus effectually prove that love does not, cannot exist, just as he would prove ideal republics are no guide to better states, and even no measure of extant ones.”

Shakespeare keeps most of these thoughts to himself. In his answering letter, he contents himself with making a different remark, one aimed at moderating his correspondent’s claims. “One consequence of the free will my characters manage to exercise...is that others cannot predict it; even the sagacity of the sage is limited by that reality; that’s a hard fact those who are proud of penetrating hard things do not like to acknowledge.” The news of his Lord Protector’s death first makes King Henry faint. But then his realization of his unintentional responsibility for that death “fills him, for once, with spirit,” a possibility neither his enemies nor the play’s audience anticipate. “My characters are always doing something a bit ‘out of character,’ very much like the men and women I know, like myself.” His point to Machiavelli: conscience does not invariably make cowards of us all. Sometimes it makes some of us courageous. “A sense of guilt is not always a disadvantage, and its absence not always an advantage.” Character matters, but it is not quite fate. Equally, the attempt to conquer fate, Fortuna, to satisfy an unlimited desire to acquire by somehow getting “behind” one’s character, manipulating it, “using” one’s virtues and vices, makes too much of freedom.

Shakespeare thus agrees that Henry and Edward are no fit kings, although for different reasons. What of the tyrant who succeeds them, Edward’s father, Richard III? Machiavelli applauds. “In these *Histories* so far, I most esteem this man most,” he exclaims, with redundant emphasis. “I positively exult in Richard’s politic employment of Christian scripture and sentiments,” seen in his seduction of Lady Anne, widow of Henry’s son—“right beside her husband’s coffin,” no less. Machiavelli delights in Richard’s “witty expression” of his prideful contempt for his inferiors, phrases Shakespeare turns that are even better than his own clever formulations in *The Prince*. Still, he faults

Richard for being a bit too open in his blasphemies, a mistake symptomatic of an overall lack of prudence. What is more, “other than gaining the crown, he has no purpose, no plan.” In this, his anti-Christian stance apes the Christian’s inclination to gaze at the lilies of the field, which neither toil nor spin because the joys of the day suffice to him who expects still greater, permanent joys in eternity, needing no plan for that future time, already prepared for him by his Savior. By contrast, Machiavelli does have a plan. While hoping to rid the world of the “moderns” or Christians while radically revising the teachings of the “ancients,” Machiavelli himself would take care to salvage pieces of ancient wisdom, including prudential wisdom, even as he directs them to purposes the ancients did not regard.

Shakespeare takes up the theme of the ancients—specifically, the Romans. “Between us, I do not see Rome, either republic or empire, as wholly superior to our modern Christendom.” Because “the deepest desire of a Roman is to become a statue of himself,” Rome undertook the monumental task of world conquest. Having achieved this, Julius Caesar did indeed “achieve a statuesque immortality.” But “in becoming a god” he lost his humanity. To “despise human life” leads to a reduction of the man to a slab of granite or, if still living, a beast. Caesar’s idolatrous divinity contrasts with Christ’s everlasting life, whereby God became human, died, but continued to live and even to rule. Why is this not the superior ideal?

Ideal it may be, but is it true? Machiavelli replies that the reasoning behind the Earl of Warwick’s autopsy of Duke Humphrey, proving that the Lord Protector was murdered (*2 Henry VI* 3.2.168ff.), should be extended to consideration of claims based on “the body of Christ allegedly crucified and allegedly risen from the dead.” Christians point to miraculous stigmata on their hands, where painters depict nails driven into Jesus’s hands, attaching Him to the Cross. But “only nails through the wrists will hold a body to a cross—unless you believe in miracles. So much for all later stigmata! I and Leonardo know if anatomy were queen of the sciences there would be no theology.” Morally, too, Christianity hangs on dubious assumptions. “What a terrible idea, of a God who would punish whole innocent generations for the deeds of their grandfathers, but this God does not exist.” Fortuna, on the other hand, “hard but not interested in retribution,” shows that men “need princes not saviors,” as “men punish themselves” with their crimes of ignorance and the mental weakness induced by false religion. Shakespeare, Machiavelli confidently or perhaps wishfully asserts, rightly teaches the English to “abhor infamy, dare to reason, and be a man.”

“You say things that other men do not say, only do,” Shakespeare observes. Yet what you say is only “part of knowledge.” “Sometimes, even in politics, men do good things, and sometimes, if rarely, they aspire, even in political life, to the lofty good above them, and thus deserve to be remembered, as Good Duke Humphrey, a statesman though he failed, should be.” Your *Prince* amounts to “the unintended exhibition of your noble soul,” inasmuch as “you aspire to lasting glory, but you do not know yourself”: “I see all your desires in strife, the desire to know the truth, the desire to effect something, and the desire to win immortal fame, all there struggling in you.” Reread your own book, and if by that “you come to understand yourself, you would soon be able to order yourself.”

As for the way you would order the world, into large, centralized states, this too will lead to human self-contradiction. Before Henry VIII and his successful instantiation of your kind of state in England, a rich man gave to a poor man out of charity, a poor man felt gratitude in return. Now, “those taxed to provide will always feel it is too much, and the poor receiving it will feel it is too little”; with such “resentment in both and humiliation of the receiving poor,” will not your strong state weaken? When Machiavelli pointedly ignores this “challenge to self-examination,” he indignantly writes that the teacher of evil lives on, all right, but in the malign effects of his teachings. Scoundrels “will cite your authority for their low crimes, their base betrayals, and even their savage atrocities.” Exercising his own virtue of prudence, however, he decides to wait for a better opportunity to engage Machiavelli at his core, so to speak, “perhaps face to face, on a visit to Stratford.”

He instead more cautiously writes to “suggest that much escapes you.” In “grasping for the effectual,” you blind yourself to “noble failures, and complain of fortune, yours and Cesare Borgia’s and you do not know who to marry”—a theme of the *Odyssey*—“and I doubt you know how to die”—a theme of the *Iliad*. That is, although Machiavelli writes comedies, tragedies and epics remain beyond his reach. And even his most famous comedy, *Mandragola*, is “devoid of merriment,” more smutty than funny.

One of the things Machiavelli admits has escaped him is the reason why crafty Richard III lost his crown so soon after he took it. Shakespeare explains. Having murdered the two young princes in the Tower, Richard seeks an heir; hence his intention to marry Edward’s widow. He can conceive only of a father who will guard his heir, perpetuate his family on the throne, not one who might risk his son for the good of his country. But this is what his enemy, Lord Stanley, does, “risk[ing] his own son for the greater good of

England,” as “one of those Romans you admire” would do. Richard dies in the battle that ensues.

More profoundly, Richard fails as a man. “Feared not loved you say. Well, the truth is Richard like every man wishes to be loved.” But “he finds he cannot love himself, only fear himself.” He grew up “with everyone around him, including his mother, interpreting his shape”—his hunchback—as “a mark of God and expecting evil of him, until he does too.” Despite his ridicule of Christianity, he “swears by St. Paul five or six times,” a sign of misery beneath the mockery. He “thinks himself unloved by God, brought into existence to do evil, to be God’s scourge and minister, and yet notwithstanding, damned for being so, damned from birth exactly as some Protestants hold omniscient God to providentially rule this world, electing few, damning the many.” You, Machiavelli, “share his hatred of God, but not how it began in him. He thought God hated him. He hated God for that” and came to “hate himself.” In his last battle “he was seeking death, as an end to his wretched life.” Is your life any less miserable, Machiavelli?

But to send such a letter would be to go too far, too soon. Shakespeare “sends only a trim draft of the letter he’s rushed into.”

In his reply, Machiavelli denies that he recognizes no noble failures. “I recognized Cesare Borgia.” “His failure to unite Italy, at least Northern Italy and Rome, and drive out the barbarians, was the noblest failure of modern times.” It is this failure that I now seek to expunge, as secretary of state of the Right, Re-Risen Roman Republic. As for the devotees of the Risen God, “No fools are more senseless than those who burn with Christian piety; they make no distinction between friend and foe, allow themselves to be deceived, and ignore injuries; they shudder at pleasure, actually find it in fasts, vigils, penances, scourges, and ordeals; in short, they shrink from life, and prefer death. This is insane.” I admire your works, Will, because I find “no good Christians in them,” except for Henry VI, “an utter disaster.” “He who would not hurt a fly, destroys a kingdom.” As for Richard, his pangs of conscience do indeed bring him down, and that is precisely the problem. If he hates himself, who is responsible for that other than his God? Or rather himself, for believing in that God. “Christianity is the cause of a tyranny as never before on earth,” of tyrants who “must hate every well-formed human being and even hate human life itself. No previous tyrants, wicked as their deeds were, ever did so.” The ancients knew nature; the Christians deny it and in that denial ruin everything they touch.

Shakespeare continues to find Machiavelli's interpretation of his plays too narrow. It is as if Machiavelli were a latter-day Xenophon, but one who never wrote Socratic dialogues. "Xenophon knew Socrates, Xenophon looked up to Socrates. You're no Xenophon." If you were, you would see that Richard's restless night before his last battle, when he is visited in his dreams by the ghosts of all those he's murdered, amounts to "a Socratic self-examination." Machiavelli does not imagine "how a poet might oppose tyranny, working from within, getting the tyrant to confess his misery," as I hope to do "in a play about the Scottish usurper Macbeth." Steeling himself to murder the king, Macbeth will tell himself, "To do this deed, I must not know myself." Do you, Machiavelli, in your intention to murder God, really know yourself? "In hating God you are in some danger of hating the good." If you have concluded from reading *Richard III* that I therein prove the lethality of Christian belief, wait until you have read my second English history tetralogy, the one in which I portray Henry IV, Henry V, and Falstaff. I send you the manuscripts and I also invite you to "resume our conversation, but face to face, in Stratford."

Upon receiving the manuscript, Machiavelli is only the more convinced that he needs to enlist "this vivacious English captain to my cause." Had Henry V "lived only ten years more," he writes, "his reputation would have been glorified by additional conquests, his realm enlarged, his hold on it firmer, his son better educated, and the prospect of his son's rule fairer." Henry's very statements against my teachings and my disciples merely indicate his adherence to those teachings and his status among my disciples, since "those who declare themselves Machiavels have not understood the first thing about my teaching." He is happy to accept Shakespeare's invitation to dine.

In their dialogue over dinner, speaking of the second Henriad, Machiavelli continues his complaints about Christianity. When Shakespeare observes that Richard II is the only king in his Histories to compare himself to Christ, Machiavelli replies, again, that that is exactly the problem with him. "Christ was no ruler. All he teaches is how to lose and then be pitiful, passionate, and poetical about it." This is true of Richard, Shakespeare agrees, "but the question who should rule is not as deep or as deeply engaging as how should we die and dying, live"—the question addressed by Jesus in His crucifixion and resurrection. In his attempt to come to terms with that issue, Richard wins and deserves the audience's sympathy. Having effectively dismissed both Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection as myths, and so passionately that he never notices that the question of death remains real even if Jesus is not, Machiavelli ignores this argument and continues to speak about ruling. In

ruling, “only effectual truths yield benefits,” not poetic images. Richard’s belated Christian maunderings leave the English no choice but to side with Henry Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV, who replaces the Plantagenet line with his own.

He does it by what Shakespeare calls “the deliberately accidental murder of Richard,” an act “inseparable from the justice of the monarchy,” even as Elizabeth I’s beheading of Mary Queen of Scots was inseparable from the justice of her monarchy. Although Richard himself posed no threat to the new dynasty, his adherents did. There are “two goods” which must “be held together, justice and peace,” and “two principles that all rulers must keep together, and all monarchs must keep together, namely, inheritance and virtue.” Shakespeare disagrees with Machiavelli in denying that legitimacy and the authority it lends to power serve merely as covering for power, a fraud that veils force. “Some will remember the piteous and yet desirable passing of the Crown” from Richard to Henry “as an impeachment and removal, some will remember it as an abdication that left the throne unoccupied, and others will remember it as a simple gift from one cousin to another, but all will remember that Richard did participate in it. And that makes it somewhat legitimate and will somewhat obstruct any later claims of wrongful usurpation. Ceremonies matter. One might even call them effectual.” As for Richard’s murder, whereas Machiavelli considers Henry responsible for it (the new king complained about the former king in front of a courtier who took the complaint as a command issued in the form of a hint), Shakespeare reminds him that Henry does not “admire himself [for his cousin’s death], as you do him.”

This brings them to the next, great, Henry. They agree that while spirited Hotspur is a lion, sly Falstaff a fox, Prince Hal is both. By (as Shakespeare puts it, in Machiavelli’s phrase) using the lion and the fox, Hal proves himself the true prince. Yet Shakespeare sees virtues rather than *virtù* in this: “prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice.” That “smells of Socrates,” Machiavelli sneers, the man whose imagining of republics disabled him from founding a real one. “I hope you don’t carry hemlock with you” to our dinner, Shakespeare replies, in mock alarm. Machiavelli zeroes in: Your Henry is not “quite enough of a lion and a fox. He was not cruel enough.” Had he allowed his father to be killed on the battlefield instead of rescuing him, Prince Hal could have been king five years earlier, “started for France five years earlier,” and then, having conquered and absorbed it, set out for Italy, uniting Europe and ruining the papacy for good.

No, Shakespeare replies. “I can hear” Henry V replying to such a suggestion: “What, are we turned Turk, that for our advantage we would see our fathers murdered by our committing omission?” Indeed we should, Machiavelli insists, “for greatness.” No, again, Shakespeare’s Henry answers: “We doubt that greatness comes without some goodness. We know that it does not come from such evil.” Seeing his father in deadly peril, he defends him without hesitation, rightly winning his father’s confidence in his loyalty, at least in the aftermath of the moment. Then and subsequently, Prince Hal proves he can “wait to become king,” although his father begins to doubt it. “Son Hal knows his father better than father Henry IV knows him, his own son.” But this makes your second *Henry IV* play a bit boring, Machiavelli complains. You are right, Shakespeare concedes. The play is about tired old age, undramatic but natural, a condition sons must eventually deal with, as they consider their fathers. Prince Hal will not force nature.

Machiavelli (and his true English captain, Francis Bacon) would. They look for physical means of prolonging physical life—Bacon with his experiments involving the refrigeration of chickens, Machiavelli with his Makropulos potion. Machiavelli tempts Shakespeare by offering him a dose, which Shakespeare declines, saying, “Life would not be better without death. Truly, it would no longer be life.” Perpetual life is what would be tiresome. Machiavelli seems not to appreciate the implications of his own atheism; he denies the God Who offers eternal life while still yearning for such a life. To Machiavelli’s temptation, Shakespeare effectively answers with a counter-temptation: Have the courage of your own convictions, if those really are your own convictions.

The dialogue ends with a consideration of Henry V, a man who overcame temptations. Shakespeare cites Henry’s first soliloquy, which begins with the claim, “I know you all”—Falstaff, Poins, and the rest of his drinking buddies (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.188–209). This is “plain truth not juvenile excuses.” Henry has “learn[ed] nothing from Falstaff”; he spent time with him because he was biding his own time, waiting to enter the public realm with *éclat*. Indeed, the marshall of France and Welsh Fluellen “have some inkling of what Henry of England is up to.” And Henry knows something even they, even Machiavelli himself, do not: that “the spirit of the men” wins wars, a spirit animated “not so much by their fear of the prince, but their love of him.” To be sure, like founding, war means blood; there will be winners and losers, and that is not simply a matter of power but of the good in the real world, wherein “seeking some good always sacrifices some other.” If “the beautiful, the true and the

good seldom coincide,” then Machiavelli’s attempted use of Shakespeare as a means of lending beauty to his ugly (half) truth amounts to a highly unlikely project, even if, perhaps especially if, Shakespeare were to play along with it.

“Yes,” Machiavelli remarks, “we need to talk of good war, not just war.” Henry, Shakespeare explains, wants to retake France not as a means of reuniting the shards of the Roman Empire but to avoid the evil of civil war in England by redirecting the thoughts and actions of England’s restive aristocrats overseas and to render his foot soldiers obedient. Machiavelli claims that that, too, is Machiavellian, but Shakespeare rejoins that civil war is an evil greatly to be avoided, and that steadying troops “in the face of a fearful adversary”—a danger he faces with them—hardly qualifies as cynicism. Neither “poetic and deluded like Richard II,” nor “malicious and deluded like Richard III,” nor “provoked by injustice like his father, nor by love of fame like Hotspur” (nor, one might add, love of sack like Falstaff), and above all not by acquisition, like you, Machiavelli; Henry’s only possible motivation is duty.

In that case, Machiavelli says, “I don’t understand him.” “Not even Socrates might,” Shakespeare suggests, because Socrates associates political life with convention, mere opinion, which potential philosophers ought to put their strength into overcoming in rational ascent from those borrowed lights. “According to Socrates there is no reason for a philosopher to rule,” and no obligation, either. “To become who you are, you had to fight all opinions.” But Henry is no “ancient,” any more than he is a “modern” in Machiavelli’s sense. “He is the inheritor of a potent model of nobility, one unknown to the ancients, princes and philosophers, of the highest serving the low, of an immortal who not only seeks the good of mortals, like Prometheus, but who suffers for them, even unto joining them in death.”

Machiavelli does not like the sound of that. It sounds like Christ to him, and Shakespeare readily admits it, and with a proto-Nietzschean turn, at that. “Though Christ refused to rule, and even seemed to leave ruling to the Caesars, still he provided a pattern for rulers. Let them be Caesars, but Caesars with something of the soul of suffering Christ.” Ready to sacrifice themselves for the good of their people. Henry is “the greatest man of deeds I can imagine”; “though I love others more, I admire none more than him”—a “great Prince, which we are not, and what is more, he was a greater man” superior to me not in writing, in wit, or in thinking but in the “single-minded active pursuit of the good.”

Shakespeare thus denies Machiavelli's central claim about Christianity, that it unfits men for rule. Shakespeare claims instead that Christianity can make politics better and politicians more effective. Against this, Machiavelli has one last temptation up his antitheological sleeve. "Shakespeare, you are a great prince, but of shadows. You could be one of nations, peoples, and states, indeed the world." "No, it is not for me," Shakespeare quickly answers. It is not my nature. Unlike Henry VI, Shakespeare can choose what to do with his life. No royal inheritance burdens him. He bears only a natural inheritance, to which he intends to give full scope. He has chosen a life of inquiry undertaken through observing men and women and writing plays about them. Many of those persons say not only true and false things but true things at odds with one another. In this, his plays resemble the Gospel: "Everyone who arrives sure of something will find something to keep him sure," as Machiavelli has done, but "only by being alert to contrary truths, might you ever later make your way to unity" by "wrestl[ing] like Jacob with the angel." In the Gospel, "Christ himself is responsible for his bounty and the difficulty arising from it," with some aphorisms saying one thing—"it is harder for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle" to get into heaven—and others saying the opposite—become like a trusting child, and you will be on the way there. Jesus leaves it to His listeners to bring such things together. Jesus poses His own version of the Socratic challenge to undertake philosophizing. To pose such difficulties to his audience is Shakespeare's vocation, his *imitatio Christi*.

Shakespeare has withheld something from the manuscript of *Henry V* he gave Machiavelli to read. It is Henry's prayer on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, where he prays first to "the God of Battles" to "steel my soldiers' hearts" but then to the Lord, asking forgiveness for his father's part in Richard II's death ("I have built / Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests / Sing still for Richard's soul" [*Henry V*, 4.1.285–301]). Reading this, Machiavelli storms out, "losing forever the chance not only to enjoy lofty things, but from that coign of vantage, come to know all the low things, which he thought he already knew."

