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Introduction

Catherine H. Zuckert

The *Review of Politics* joins the worldwide celebration of the 400th anniversary of the birth of William Shakespeare by devoting this special issue to his politics. That the bard deserves recognition is beyond question, but the fact or character of his politics is not. Elizabeth Frazer thus begins her essay "Shakespeare's Politics" by addressing the reasons why some readers believe that it is a mistake to read Shakespeare politically at all. They think that the plays emphasize the individual characters and their relations, and that the political settings serve merely as frames for the action. Shakespeare is, admittedly and obviously, not a political theorist, Frazer acknowledges; he writes plays and poems, not pamphlets or treatises. The plays contain arguments, but those arguments are put in the mouths of particular characters, with particular ideas and interests, acting under particular circumstances. It would be a mistake, therefore, to equate any one, simply or ambiguously, with the views of the playwright. Nevertheless, she points out, by depicting different political regimes in different times and places, Shakespeare not merely raises the question, Which is best? He also shows the complex ways in which the "personal" relations of men and women, parents and children, are affected by legal or political allocations of power as well as the way in which individual characteristics and attachments affect the exercise of those powers. He often depicts the difficult decisions leaders have to make—decisions which not only define them as individuals but also determine the fate of their people. And he raises questions about the morality of the "politick," if not Machiavellian requirements of acquiring and maintaining public office. At the same time, the playwright appears to be acutely aware that his own productions are not merely commercial enterprises, but public actions. As many of the essays in this issue show, he uses the opportunity provided by distant settings and indirect speech to comment on contemporary controversies and events.

The essays on individual plays included in this special issue provide examples of some of the many different approaches to Shakespeare's politics that Frazer surveys. The articles are ordered here loosely on the basis of the historical period or periods depicted in the plays analyzed; but as many of the authors insist, the political commentary or wisdom contained within these plays is by no means restricted to that historical period.

In "Ulysses Is Not the Hero of *Troilus and Cressida*" and "Philosophy (and Athens) in Decay: *Timon of Athens*," respectively, Tim Spiekerman and Jan

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Blits analyze Shakespeare's critique of ancient Greek rationalism—first its practical or political form as embodied by Ulysses at the beginning of what we consider ancient Greek civilization and then its philosophical form, if decayed, at the end. As depicted in the characters of Ulysses and Apemantus, Spiekerman and Blits show, the "realistic" critique that uncovers and destroys the illusions of others concerning love, friendship, and honor proves to be not merely cynical, but fundamentally misanthropic. The Athenians may once have loved beauty as much as they loved freedom, as Pericles claims in his famous funeral oration, but, as Shakespeare shows in *Timon*, that love of beauty quickly degenerated into base greed.

Whereas Blits and Spiekerman both contend that Shakespeare is addressing themes related particularly to Greek rationalism, Paulina Kewes and Andrew Hadfield argue that at least one of Shakespeare's "Roman" plays, *Titus Andronicus* in the case of Kewes and *Coriolanus* in the case of Hadfield, can and should be read not as an analysis of ancient politics so much as an indirect commentary on political and religious controversies in the playwright's own times. "Pagan Rome offered a relatively safe framework in which to dissect changing loci of power, and to relate institutional legal structures to the moral ethos of a people," Kewes observes. "*Pace* the more enthusiastic recent exponents of neo-roman or 'republican' strains in Elizabethan thought, however, the dilemma exercising [Shakespeare's] contemporaries … was not whether England should be a monarchy but what sort of monarchy it should be." The fictional Roman history George Peele and Shakespeare present in *Titus* does not endorse hereditary succession any more than it does election; its object is to make the audience reflect on the relative advantages and disadvantages of each.

"The perceived need to read the plays in terms of familiar generic types," Hadfield thinks, have "limited our understanding of Shakespeare's political thought." For example, "the Roman plays are invariably clustered as a distinct group of four, *Titus Andronicus, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, even though they were written over about fifteen years of a career of just over two decades, under very different conditions, and for diverse reasons." *Coriolanus* can be read as an exploration of "one of the central themes in Roman history, the fear that as the city-republic becomes more powerful and recruits an ever larger army in order to expand the territories under its control the diverse new inhabitants assembled from the far-flung reaches of the expanding empire along with the increasingly powerful military machine will overwhelm the political institutions of the state and it will descend into dictatorship." However, read along with *All's Well That Ends Well*, which was written at approximately the same time, *Coriolanus* appears to be concerned primarily "with the problem of fidelity." Both plays raise questions about "whether policies designed to force subjects with conflicting, equivocal, and ambiguous loyalties to pledge their allegiance to the state may end up doing more harm than good." Indeed, Hadfield concludes, "the plays are best read as Gunpowder Plot plays, nervous dramas

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that, like *Macbeth*, are directly concerned with the complex problem of the enemy within."

Macbeth is usually categorized as a tragedy, but, Michael Zuckert suggests, it could just as well be seen as a history play. Not only does it draw upon some of the same historical sources; it also highlights the issues of election, succession, usurpation, and grounds of legitimacy. Studies and productions of the play often emphasize the characters and psychological makeup of Macbeth and his wife. But to understand the broader significance both of these characters and their fates, Zuckert argues, it is necessary to examine the two contexts in which Shakespeare explicitly places them. And the significance of both contexts is further illuminated by reference to Machiavelli's *Prince.* The first context is the historical and political situation in Scotland. Although Duncan tries to make the crown hereditary by naming his son Malcolm his successor, Shakespeare shows that Scotland is a feudal regime in which the king is elected by semi-independent barons (or thanes). As Machiavelli argues in chapters 4 and 5 of the *Prince*, such regimes are relatively easy to acquire with the help of dissatisfied, ambitious lords, but difficult to maintain. The second "cosmological" context is set by the witches. The "art" of these mysterious beings does not give them the power to kill, but it does enable them to harm human beings, like Macbeth, by misleading them. The prophesy he takes to guarantee his security, but that leads to his downfall constitutes Shakespeare's warning against the potentially disastrous results of the Machiavellian attempt to overcome fortuna.

"Shakespeare's most innovative genre was the history play," John Cox argues, "because it has no precedent in either classical or medieval tradition. To be sure, the great biblical cycles … stage a version of salvation history from Creation to Last Judgment, but no playwright had previously adapted narrative chronicle history to drama in sequential plays that treat a broad segment of England's past." And in those plays, time or timing constitutes a persistent theme, because political agents necessarily act in time. Richard II loses his kingdom by arriving back from Ireland a day too late, and Henry IV warns his son that his current familiarity with the commons will lead them to disrespect him later. "But the future Henry V regards the familiarity of the commoners as a political asset. They will be loyal to him when he needs their loyalty"—as they prove to be in his decisive battle with the French at Agincourt. Henry V's understanding of the power of appearances in politics along with the need to garner popular support makes him the most Machiavellian of Shakespeare's kings. But his own untimely death, leaving a young heir to be exploited and overthrown by his ambitious uncles, dramatizes the impossibility of controlling time which goes on without him. And it is this linear, as opposed to cyclical, understanding of time or fortuna, Cox concludes, that distinguishes Shakespeare's understanding of politics from Machiavelli's.

Conal Condren focuses attention on the famous garden scene in *Richard II.* Rather than constituting an image of correct rule, according to nature and

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divinely sanctioned, he argues, the dissonance between the orderly tending of the garden that demands constant vigilance and the shifting balance of power and loyalties between Richard and Bolingbroke with which it is surrounded in the play serves to dramatize the impossibility of realizing that "ideal." "Horticultural imagery cannot substitute for the prudential flexibility at the heart of constancy in good conduct." But what does "constancy" or loyalty require? Resistance to a king become tyrant? Loyalty to family? Recognition of the needs of the state? Resistance or obedience to a known usurper? Like Kewes and Hadfield, Condren suggests that Shakespeare dramatized the problem that beset his contemporaries, but did not propose a solution.

In "Hamlet and the Sovereignty of Reasons" Jeffrey Knapp suggests that Shakespeare intentionally forestalled any single reading or interpretation of his plays. Sigmund Freud boasted that he alone had found the source of Hamlet's famous hesitation to act against King Claudius in "the predicament that Hamlet shared with his theatrical ancestor Oedipus: 'being in love with … one parent and hating the other.'" However, Knapp argues, Shakespeare shows that both Claudius and Hamlet confront the problem constituted by the attempt to impose one understanding on a multi-sided series of events. The imposition of a single interpretation is a sovereign act, but the multiplicity of motives or reasons in the actors resists such an imposition. "Shakespeare associates Hamlet's mass of motivations with a monarchy in crisis," because, as the history plays show, the notion of a "sovereign" as the single embodiment of a multitude of people, expressed by the "royal we," is itself paradoxical. By refusing to offer a single sovereign reason for Hamlet's grief, Knapp concludes, "Shakespeare committed himself to a dramaturgy that could … accommodate the broad range of interpretations in a diverse audience."

Paul Cantor concludes this collection of essays by reminding us how often Shakespeare's plays have been produced in different times and places, and argues that this fact alone suggests that the plays contain an enduring form of political wisdom that is universally accessible. He uses Tom Stoppard's appropriation and re-presentation of Shakespeare in *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* as an example. Stoppard has looked back to the bard throughout his career, Cantor observes. He became famous with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), a brilliant transformation of the tragedy of *Hamlet* into Beckettian theater of the absurd, and achieved great popular success by cowriting the screenplay for the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). But it was only his return to his Czech roots and experience of his people's ongoing struggles with various forms of tyranny that showed Stoppard the way in which writing and performing plays can be a political act. He wrote the hilarious performance of a condensation of *Hamlet* into fifteen minutes in front of an audience that speaks a different language (Dogg) before his art became explicitly political. But by combining it with *Cahoot's Macbeth*, he expanded the meaning by changing the context. In *Cahoot's Macbeth* Stoppard recreated a historical event—the 1978 staging of an adaptation of

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Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the home of the actress Vlasta Chramostová by a group called the Living-Room Theater as a protest against Communist tyranny. "In a brilliant stage move," Cantor explains, "Stoppard shows [the production of the Czech playwright Pavel] Kohout's *Macbeth* interrupted by a thuggish member of the Communist secret police, who tries to close down the subversive proceedings." But in the middle of the production, a character from *Dogg's Hamlet* "jumps theatrical worlds and … teaches Stoppard's invented language to the cast, with the result that, at the end of the play, we are hearing *Macbeth* performed in Dogg—much to the consternation of the inspector, who senses that something is being put over on him, although he cannot put his finger on exactly what is happening." What unites *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* is that "both parts end with Shakespeare being played in a language foreign to the audience on stage." The point, Cantor argues, is that in the English-speaking world Shakespeare has become a foreign language, recited without comprehension of its meaning, by the schoolboys forced to learn it. But for the Czech dissidents, a performance of *Macbeth* constituted a means of protesting the tyranny of the occupying powers whose censors could not attribute a single line to the individual actors or director.

This special issue ends with a review essay by John Alvis of Leon Craig's *The Philosopher's English King: Shakespeare's "Henriad" as Political Philosophy.* Craig's contention that Shakespeare is a philosopher and Henry V is the best of his English kings can be fully understood, Alvis argues, only on the basis of Craig's original amalgamation of Plato, Shakespeare, and Hobbes in his four previous books: *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's "Republic"* (1993), *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" and "King Lear"* (2001), *The Platonian Leviathan* (2010), and *Philosophy and the Puzzles of "Hamlet"* (2014). In his review essay Alvis thus attempts to provide readers with a comprehensive account of Craig's fusion of literary analysis and political philosophy.

In this special issue we not only hope to have shown how much can be learned about politics from reading Shakespeare. We also believe that these essays illustrate how much can be learned about the plays by reading them with an eye to their political implications.

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