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Shakespeare's Politics

Elizabeth Frazer

Abstract: This paper sets out diverse ways that Shakespeare's dramas can be read politically. Critics and political theorists have often concentrated on what Shakespeare said about politics—whether he was broadly republican or monarchist, protofeminist or a patriarchalist—as well as concentrating on his references to political themes of his day. Focusing on political readings of *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, I argue that, rather, we should pay attention to how Shakespeare plays with numerous styles of political action and role, from statesmanship and the competiton for state office or for sovereignty, to the everyday relations of kinship and friendship that interact with state government and law, and to individuals' struggles against politically established power—patriarchy, class, state law—that constrains or oppresses them. The figure of the Machiavellian political operator, whether acting for good or for ill, is contrasted with the open speaker of truth in public.

I. Introduction

In this paper I set out diverse ways that Shakespeare's plays can be read politically.[1] I argue that debates about "Shakespeare and politics" have often tended to pursue lines of argument which are reductionist about Shakespeare and about "politics" in equal measure. Lively arguments focus on whether Shakespeare voiced commonplace commitment to the unified sovereignty of the crown or had incipient republican sympathies for the common people; on whether he was a protofeminist with his feisty cross-dressing heroines or whether these heroines' roles serve only, in the end, to

Elizabeth Frazer, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, and New College, Oxford (elizabeth.frazer@politics.ox.ac.uk).

[1]In this paper I concentrate for reasons of focus on *Merchant of Venice* (1595) and *Othello* (1604), whose political themes are unified by Shakespeare's depictions of a republican mercantile setting. The broader analysis is based on readings also of "the tragedies"—*Romeo and Juliet* (1593), *Hamlet* (1602), *King Lear* (1605), and *Macbeth* (1606), plus the Roman plays *Titus Andronicus* (1594), *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), *Coriolanus* (1608), and another play that like *Merchant* is a problematic comedy, *Measure for Measure* (1604). This problematic division of comedy and tragedy doesn't make significant difference, in my analysis, to how Shakespeare treats and articulates political themes.

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confirm women's proper tutelage to men. It is also controversial whether for him politics as such is ethically suspect, to be eschewed in favor of individual relationships and passions, or whether the plays articulate anything like a redemptive theory of politics.

These controversies, informative in terms of readings of the plays as they have been, mislead us to the extent that they imply that there is "an answer" regarding Shakespeare's politics; and the way I have set them out here is misleading, as binary oppositions tend to be. A central element of my analysis is that the plays invariably upset any clear distinctions, such as sovereign-subject, masculine-feminine, politics-society, or any other binary we associate with politics.[2] They are also misleading to the extent that they tempt us to read the plays for the political message they convey. It is more productive to read Shakespeare's dramas as in some sense enacting aspects of politics, representing to audiences, and engaging them in, something of the phenomenology of political life.[3] In this paper I emphasize two aspects of this. First, there is Shakespeare's famous multivocality, his ventriloquism, the excess of his language, his characters, his plots. This multiplicity and plurality, and the complexity and indeterminacy that go with them, tell us more about politics, and about Shakespeare on politics, than do analyses of arguments respectively for unified aristocratic rule or for democratic voice. Second, there is no doubt that the theater for Shakespeare was political, as well as ethical and artistic; and furthermore that for him politics is theatrical.

II. Is Shakespeare a Political Thinker?

Before I elaborate these arguments by reference to the dramas, I address a line of thinking that continues to be a nagging objection to the enterprise of

[2]In Shakespeare's treatments binary alternatives are most likely to turn up as paradoxical antitheses: "fair is foul and foul is fair" (*Macbeth*, 1.1.11 [Weird Sisters]); the masculine-feminine, west-east scheme that pervades *Antony and Cleopatra* is persistently problematized—e.g., Cleopatra dies a more stoical death than Antony (5.2.236–41, 305–12). See further Peter Platt, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

[3]In this view I am following analyses such as Jean Howard's in "Dramatic Traditions and Shakespeare's Political Thought," in *British Political Thought in History, Literature and Theory 1500–1800*, ed. David Armitage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 129–44, who argues that Shakespeare refracts rather than reflects political thought (129), that his political thought is embodied in dramaturgy (132), while the plots rehearse political action and choice, including asking about settings in which the commons—and, I would add, other members of other hitherto excluded groups, including women, and those who are alien to the polity (pace, in this paper, Othello and Shylock)—act in political roles (134).

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analyzing Shakespeare's politics.[4] This is the idea that it is a mistake to read Shakespeare politically at all.[5]

It is obviously common for commentaries and analyses of the plays to emphasize the themes of individual and social relationships. Sexual love and conflict, jealousy and revenge for insult, uses of violence and sneaky trickery, psychological stress, emotional pain, strengths and weaknesses of character, friendships forged and undermined—these are the themes of Shakespeare's plays, and they are themes for humanity. By contrast the explicitly political settings—a state of some kind, characters who inhabit political office or have been deprived of it, plots that turn on invasions or negotiations—can seem to be nothing more than a frame for plot and action. Conducting detailed or extended analysis of the politics of Shakespeare's plays can be argued to be like focusing on the frame of a painting instead of the artwork itself. Yes, Othello is a trusted officer of the state, who is brought down by a jealous subordinate officer—for reasons to do with race, and class, and proper authority—when they are engaged in state business. But we could set *Othello* in a supermarket where he is manager and Iago an accountant; or on a farm where both are working the land; or in any setting—a football team, or an Iron Age village, or a camping holiday. Focus on "politics" is an egregious missing of the point at worst, incidental to the main interest at best.

The tendency to such a view is certainly reinforced by the logic and constraints of Shakespeare in performance. Psychological dilemmas and pain, emotional extremes, and conflicts between couples and between friends are at the heart of Shakespeare's plots. The great tragic roles especially call for powerful performances by actors with stamina, experience, and artistic brilliance. The star system frequently leads to productions that focus on the individual, their poetic speech, thinking, action, and emotions. Scenes and

[4]From the political theory point of view this obviously is odd at a time when historians of political thought are more frequently taking Shakespeare very seriously—notable recent collections include Catherine Alexander, ed., *Shakespeare and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); John Murley and Sean Sutton, eds., *Perspectives on Politics in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006); David Armitage, Conal Condren, and Andrew Fitzmaurice, eds., *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Quentin Skinner, *Forensic Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). The question of how politics is treated in Shakespeare's dramas is of abiding interest—for instance as posed by contributors to this special issue; also Tim Spiekerman, *Shakespeare's Political Realism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) and the earlier culturally materialist readings, e.g., in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985). Shakespeare also turns up in thematic theoretical monographs, e.g., Jeffrey Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[5]See Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* (London: Thomson Learning, 2004), vii–viii for discussion and rejection of this view.

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episodes call for virtuosic clowning, or are susceptible to interpretation as comedy sketch performance. There are spectacular pageants, music, and dance, all of which, of course, add to the powerful audience experience.

We must add to this the length of many of Shakespeare's texts. In *Othello*, the duke and senators have a long discussion of Turkish strategy and tactics and their threat to Venetian interests.[6] In staging this scene it must be tempting to cut these exchanges short, and move more quickly to Brabantio's entrance, and his appeal about his daughter's elopement.[7] Such cuts make the duke less a statesman who is concerned about his notable citizens' family welfare (a matter of politics in its traditional state sense), and more a trusted figure of no particular identity, simply an interlocutor who feeds lines which allow the audience to hear Brabantio's feelings about Desdemona and Othello (setting the scene for the family and individual drama of passion). Politics, in the sense of the detail of statecraft, strategy, diplomacy, office, gives way to interpersonal emotion. *Hamlet* uncut will take about five hours in performance. Obviously, most directors will shorten or excise Claudius's ruminations on the political history between Norway and Denmark, his strategic calculations about foreign policy, and his instructions to his ambassadors.[8] Such cuts of the boring political bits mean that when young Fortinbras comes on the scene and witnesses the final carnage of the action,[9] he can seem to be an inexplicable outsider, albeit one who comments on the appalling tragedy of the scene and the need for a new start in Denmark. He takes up the formal role of epilogue.

We cannot read Shakespeare as a political thinker in the way we can read other figures from the literary canon as political thinkers.[10] Shakespeare has not left us any treatises or texts, which systematically set out principles for government, for organization and action, or views about office.[11] He was obviously engaged with politics and current affairs, though, in the way of a knowledgeable, insightful person, and one who furthermore, as a participant in public theater and part owner of a commercial theater, had to deal with the censorship authorities.[12] This engagement is reflected in the plays in the form of topical allusions, and more or less daring comments on events and persons. Such allusions are significant for scholars and critics, for whom they are an

[6]*Othello*, 1.3.1–48.
[7]Ibid., 1.3.48–76.
[8]*Hamlet*, 1.2.17–40.
[9]Ibid., 5.2.315–56.
[10]Anthony Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 1.
[11]In the helpful analysis of Thomas Donahue and Paulina Ochoa Espejo, "The Analytic-Continental Divide: Styles of Dealing with Problems," *European Journal of Political Theory* 15, no. 2 (2015): 1–17, Shakespeare "presses" rather than seeks to solve political problems.
[12]Louis Montrose, "Shakespeare, the Stage and the State," in "Politics on Stage," special issue, *SubStance* 25, no. 2 (1996): 46–67, esp. 49–51.

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important element of Shakespeare's sources, and they contribute to a picture of Shakespeare as an insightful commentator on the politics of his day. The dramas have an undoubted political dimension in this sense; Shakespeare's contemporary audiences—or some members of them, at least—would have experienced the pleasure of recognition, of being in the know about allusions, in particular daring or satirical ones. But noting such topical allusion is consistent with denying, or downplaying, the political significance of a work over all.[13]

III. What Is Politics?

This idea that at most the dramas have a political dimension, which nevertheless is subordinate to ethics, or character, or to love, sex, and death, turns on a particular construction of politics. We must note that for political theorists and participants alike what politics is and what it should be are questions that are ever contested. Shakespeare's dramas play with rival accounts. They also play with the competing pulls and principles of households, markets, interpersonal love and passion, religion, and magic—with alternative ways of living, conducting oneself, and exercising judgment, other than the political way.

An obvious first core meaning of politics identifies it with *the processes and institutions of state government, and the maintenance of and the competition for the power to govern by sovereigns, power seekers, and their rivals*. This is a central aspect, obviously, of the setting, and the plot, of numerous of Shakespeare's dramas. We might judge that although many of the plays are "about" politics in this sense, the theme is better understood as frame rather than as focus. On the other hand, whereas in the Venetian republic as Shakespeare draws it the duke and the senators, the oligarchy, are pretty secure in their rule, in many plays fear of murder, or loss of sovereignty in military combat, and efforts to build loyal allegiance by a critical mass of allies and supporters pervade the plot. Where such political themes are set in distant or exotic lands and times, far away—ancient Rome, ancient Britain, Italy—Shakespeare can be seen as "othering" the institutions and the characters' political struggles. Equally, though, endorsement of "our ways" in contradistinction to some depicted alternative does not leave "our ways" exactly as they were. To this extent, Shakespeare, as author, playwright, is political—he *brings the*

[13]For example, Hadfield both notes the numerous contemporary allusions, comments, and satirical or ironic judgments on King James's display of wealth, the spending and patronage of the court, and the cultural significance of masques and hunts that can be read in *Timon of Athens* (attributed to Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton), and argues that although the play may have had a "political charge" for its audiences, it is above all a "moral fable with a political dimension" (Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, 200–205).

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naturalness or the uncontested legitimacy of institutions of government and sovereignty into question. Furthermore, as I go on to discuss, he does this *publicly* to the extent that the commercial theater is like a forum.[14]

In late twentieth-century social theory and political culture alike there has been the familiar push to widen the theme of politics, to apply it more broadly to society and social relations. Three dimensions of such a broader conception of politics are emphasized in this essay. First, *everyday relations, the institutions and exchanges of family, economy, religion, culture are implicated in the power to govern the state. Merchant of Venice*, among other things, shows how the everyday relations of friendship, kinship, and culture (especially coreligion) have an impact on the Duke's capacity to exercise political authority, and on his sovereign capacity to dispense justice according to law.[15] Conversely, *the power to govern impacts directly on the social and familial lives of the characters.* The Duke in *Othello* has the moral and also presumably the political authority to pronounce on the rightness of Brabantio's claim that the marriage between Othello and Desdemona be stopped. The foreign policy of the state of Venice means that troops and traders are deployed to Cyprus; war, like peace, has a direct effect on family, personal and professional lives.[16] This is one widening of the concept of politics.

A second is that *the question how authority is allocated applies in all social settings*. Who has power over whom, by what means authority and power are justified, contested, competed over, are questions to be asked about families, cultures, religions, economies, as much as states. There is every reason to read Shakespeare as sensitive to the political—in this sense—nature of relations between fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters, parents and children, rich and poor, materially secure and dispossessed, high status and low status, those with cultural, or economic, or religious, or physical power and those without.

The third salient meaning of "political" that is very evident in Shakespeare's plots and narratives, and very relevant to political theorists,

[14]See further David Scott Kastan, "Proud Majesty Made Subject: Shakespeare and the Spectacle of Rule," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1986): 460–61.

[15]See Richard Arneson, "Shakespeare and the Jewish Question," *Political Theory* 13, no.1 (1985): 85–111 for examination of how developing ideas of freedom of contract figure in *Merchant of Venice*, and the question of what contracts and bonds are normative in social and human relations; see also Jay L. Halio, introduction to *The Merchant of Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1–83 on this theme of bonds and bonding in *Merchant*. See Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in "The Merchant of Venice"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) for the way these themes of voluntary and involuntary bonds intersect with the question of identity. In what follows I emphasize how the theme of friendship in relation to political society is central to the play.

[16]See Mark Matheson, "Venetian Culture and the Politics of *Othello*," in *Shakespeare and Politics*, ed. Alexander, for an account of this theme in *Othello*.

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is the idea that *politics is a specific practice* as well as a specific set of skills, techniques, and ethics, with concomitant constraints and norms governing speech, bodily comportment, dress, address, and interpersonal conduct. It is a particular way of competing for the power to govern, of approaching disputes about power, and settling, provisionally, the question of how we are to live together and organize power and authority.

In connection with this understanding of politics, political theory offers multiple answers to the question as to the nature of politics. Beyond the straightforward "art and science of government" and associated contestations about the ethical implications of the idea of government, or the more specific processes of deciding, authoritatively, "who gets what, when, where and how,"[17] there are further competing accounts of politics' social ontology and ethical nature. For many thinkers it is associated with sovereignty: the final, or even transcendent, power to decide.[18] For others, the basic requirement of politics must be justification or legitimation.[19] Another tradition emphasizes openness, contingency, chance, never-endingness, possibility rather than probability. [20]

Shakespeare's dramas, characteristically, play with all these meanings of politics—in particular, of course, the theme of sovereignty and contestations over it. The theme of openness and incompleteness is inescapable: Shakespeare's sovereigns occupy a precarious position, their authority is challenged, their pronouncements fail to come off. I cite several examples in what follows. The demand for legitimation and justification is always near the surface of the text—not only in the cases of tyrants and usurpers, but wherever characters resist the power or authority that is wielded over them by others.[21]

Shakespeare's plays show us several ways of "acting politically" and his constructions have evidently both chimed with developing political theories in the modern era, and—plausibly—been influential on our ideas of what

[17]Harold D. Laswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: Peter Smith, 1950).

[18]In the tradition from Hobbes to Schmitt: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. John Charles Addison Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Freeden dubs this the "finality drive of politics," doomed to fail but ever recurring, and the "arrogance of politics": Michael Freeden, *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5, 96ff.

[19]The post-Hobbesian tradition from Locke: John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960); Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[20]Machiavelli can be associated with this: in particular the themes of *kairos* and opportunism. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961).

[21]Spiekerman, *Shakespeare's Political Realism*, 5, 7–9.

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political actors are like. Furthermore, the plays contrast "acting politically" with other modes of conduct, and emphasize the complexity and ambiguity of the distinction. It is not clear whether acting politically is a good or bad thing. "Political" is a term that is near auto-antonymous.[22]

Statesmanship. To be politic means to be cautious, wise, conciliatory, conscious of consequences, to take all in all. There are plenty of examples of this kind of conduct in Shakespeare's plays: the Duke and Senators at the beginning of *Othello* consider alternative courses of action, try to work out what the Turks are up to, deliberate to a decision.[23] The Duke in *Merchant of Venice* does his best to prevail upon Shylock to settle with Antonio without bloodshed, for the good of the mercantile state, where it is crucial that legal contracts are upheld.[24] But Claudius in *Hamlet* engages also in this kind of statesmanlike conduct, in defense of Denmark. Claudius is an evil character, a usurper, a murderer; and one whose "politic" reasoning, whose attempts to conciliate his court and his family, serve to show that he should not be trusted because you cannot trust a politician. Public conduct can vary markedly from inner character or motivation; the very use of conciliatory language is corrupting of properly honest and ethical relationships.[25] In any case, this statesmanship is often shown to be undermined by ineffectuality. The Duke cannot resolve the dispute between Shylock and Antonio by the authority of his office, or his power to reason and persuade; but Portia in disguise as a man, and taking the role of lawyer, and using wit as well as courtroom eloquence, pushes the action on.[26]

Where it is explicit the term "politic" in Shakespeare's dramas most often characterizes conduct and reasoning which is prudential, careful, and based in wisdom. However, and notably, it is invariably used ironically.[27] Or worse:

[22]I say "near" auto-antonymous as the contradictory meanings could well be analyzed as contradictory connotations, rather than pure denotations. By contrast, the auto-antonym "to dust" picks out instances both of taking dust away, and of spreading dust, rather than suggesting these meanings.

[23]*Othello*, 1.3.1–47.

[24]*Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.16–33.

[25]George Richard Hibbard, introduction to *Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 42–45 on how Claudius's political double talk belies his corrupt and artful nature.

[26]The Prince in *Romeo and Juliet* is another notable example: he has the duty and the authority to uphold the laws, and threatens the Montagues and the Capulets with death (1.1.77–99), but it takes the plot of Friar Laurence, together with chance, to resolve the action, tragically, but with the promise of civil peace.

[27]Steven N. Zwicker, "Irony, Disguise and Deceit: What Literature Teaches Us about Politics," in *British Political Thought in History, Literature and Theory, 1500–1800*, ed. David Armitage (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145–67 for an extended account of how irony contributes to the political significance of Shakespeare's drama.

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"politic" worms are eating Polonius, whom Hamlet has killed.[28] Hamlet is being maddeningly riddling in response to the understandably anxious questions from his mother and stepfather about where Polonius's body is. When Goneril exclaims about her old father "'Tis politic and safe to let him keep at point a hundred knights!"[29] she means that to do such a thing would be the opposite of politic. Or it is used with an explicitly negative evaluation: "The devil knew not what he did when he made man politic; he crossed himself by't: and I cannot think but, in the end, the villainies of man will set him clear."[30]

The term "policy" also bears this ambiguous shading from reasonable prudence to evil strategy. Even the most "reasonable" usages are made ambiguous by irony, as in "the policy of that purpose made more in the marriage than the love of the parties,"[31] or by the irony of a morally ambiguous character like Volumnia urging "policy" on her son in *Coriolanus*.[32] In *Titus Andronicus* the strategist is Aaron who urges Lavinia's rapists to mutilate her so that she cannot tell of their guilt—as a matter of "policy."[33]

Machiavellianism. It seems plausible, then, to say that Shakespeare, like many before and since, takes a pretty dim view of politics, in the sense of the processes, phenomena, and practices pertaining to the power to govern; and also of "politicians" and those (like patriarchs or unruly crowds) who seek to wield justified domination over others. That is, he takes a dim view of political actors and political action. The "scurvy politician"[34] is a "machiavel" whose actions and words are marked by mendacity, by manipulation of others, by subterfuge.

Critics generally concur that Machiavelli—or machiavellianism, at any rate—is significant for Shakespeare's political and ethical thought.[35] The stage machiavel was already an established figure when Shakespeare was writing—for example, in Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (about 1590). There are three explicit uses of the term "machiavel" in Shakespeare's dramatic texts as we have them: *1 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI* (about 1592, that is, early in Shakespeare's dramatic writing career) and in the *Merry Wives of Windsor* (about 1599). It is

[28] *Hamlet*, 4.3.20–25.

[29] *King Lear*, 1.4. In a speech that does not appear in Stanley Wells's Oxford Shakespeare edition, but does appear in the searchable Open Source Shakespeare: http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=kinglear&Act=1&Scene 4 (accessed March 19, 2016).

[30] *Timon of Athens*, 3.3.27–30 [Servant]. In the Oxford edition, without the interpolation of "acts," this is labeled scene 7.

[31] *Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.6.117–18 [Menas].

[32] *Coriolanus*, 3.2.48–53.

[33] *Titus Andronicus*, 4.2.148–49.

[34] *King Lear*, 4.6.160; (scene 20 in Oxford University Press edition).

[35] Hugh Grady, "Shakespeare's Links to Machiavelli and Montaigne: Constructing Intellectual Modernity in Early Modern Europe," *Comparative Literature* 52, no. 2 (2000): 119–42.

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best understood, as Sydney Anglo argues, in the context of popular, scandalized contempt for the supposed vices of Italian people in general.[36] The idea of Italians as vicious, habitual users of sneaky methods of violence like poison were given a fillip by particular readings—or accounts—of parts of Machiavelli's works. As George Bull puts it, "it became as acceptable to call the Devil Machiavellian as it was to call Machiavelli diabolical."[37] In making his own use of these references, Shakespeare is evidently deploying a vague but complex commonplace.

This figure is responsible for popular distaste for politicians, for the view that good intentions and even outcomes cannot cancel out the harm that is done by political action. Nobody likes a machiavellian—good should be achieved a different way. Ethically minded principled people are committed to truth, to saying what they mean instead of twisted words and broken half-promises. Soldiers do not like politicians, whom they consider to be guilty of "talk talk talk" when what we need is open, decisive action.[38] Lately, politicians have been contrasted to their detriment with business people—who are said to get on with producing the goods, and exchanging values and making profits, and deploying resources in efficient ways. Politicians duck and dive, and do not have clear goals or criteria for success.[39] Societies and families are the repository for ethical relationships like filial love and friendship, and many writers, thinkers, and activists try to forge communities of face-to-face relationships of trust and honesty, so that we can live lives that evade the machinations of politics. Religious life and truth can deliver salvation where politicians pander to base desires and interests.[40] And so on, and so forth.

Machiavellians bad and good. Machiavellianism, in this sense, is central to Shakespeare's dramas. Iago is an obvious evil example. Having told Brabantio, without identifying himself, about Desdemona's elopement with Othello, he goes back to Othello and acts as loyal ensign.[41] He instigates a physical fight, in a self-concealing way, making it look as though injuries he

[36]Sydney Anglo, *Machiavelli—The First Century: Studies in Enthusiasm, Hostility and Irrelevance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), e.g., 273, 282, 292–94.

[37]George Bull, introduction to *The Prince*, 9.

[38]In *Coriolanus* Martius's soldierly inability to speak poetically or strategically explains his political failure (3.1.324; 3.3.51–55).

[39]In the Venetian plays, though, Shakespeare depicts the fortunes of the traders as dependent on the success of the political rule of the republic—Antonio is rueful about the fact that the rule of law must be enforced in Venice, although it will be to his detriment, for the sake of the reputation of the port (*Merchant of Venice*, 3.3.26–31).

[40]We can read *Measure for Measure* as focused on Isabella's reluctance to leave the seclusion of the convent for the public (and corrupt) setting of the city, the purity of religious life for the compromise and corruption of engagement with law, political authority, and social controversy.

[41]*Othello*, 1.1.67–69, 86–91; 1.2.1–17.

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inflicts are the work of others.[42] He is ruthless, goading Othello into suspicion and jealousy of Desdemona, encouraging and conniving in violence by Othello against Desdemona.[43] Iago is manipulative. He understands Othello's commitment to traditional values of loyalty and service.[44] He exploits this commitment for his own ends, both by acting out his own service and allegiance to Othello,[45] by casting doubt on Cassio's loyalty while protesting that he is his friend,[46] by echoing Brabantio's view that a daughter who disobeys her father will become a wife who betrays her husband.[47] Iago is cynical about political and ethical values.[48] The political values of allegiance and loyalty are shattered ruthlessly by him; the modern values of freedom, equality, and friendship are twisted into a discourse of monetary exchange.[49]

But "Machiavellian" political operators feature also in the pursuit of more or less good ends.[50] Portia's chance taking, her disguise, her use of legal reasoning, her clever twist on Shylock's bargain with Antonio serve the end of saving Antonio from probable death. I say her ends are "more or less good" sharing as I do C21 audiences' discomfort at Portia's legalistic, opportunistic, and ruthless destruction of Shylock.[51] Her subsequent use of the ring trick to test Bassanio's relative commitment to his marriage, as against his debt to the lawyer who saves his friend's life, is also of doubtful ethical merit—although in dramatic terms it adds a comic dilemma, and then resolution, to the play's overarching structure.

Machiavellians, then, are one of Shakespeare's standard representations of political actors. But his plots are many-stranded, and other forms of political action are intertwined. Further, political actions and relations are always intertwined with other kinds—with interpersonal passion, economic exchange, military virtue and vice. Portia's and Jessica's evasions of their fathers' patriarchal wills involve the assertion of the rightness and virtue of voluntaristic heterosexual love and, in Jessica's case, religious and cultural choice. These themes of voluntary exchange and bonding can be understood as asserting the values of private emotional choice, and economic rationality, as against the logic of republican sovereignty and mercantile rule (that is, here is Shakespeare criticizing politics and showing us another way). But equally,

[42]Ibid., 5.1.11–28.
[43]Ibid., 3.3.189–200, 206–13, 463–79.
[44]Matheson, "Venetian Culture," 77.
[45]*Othello*, 3.3.480.
[46]Ibid., 3.3.474.
[47]Ibid., 1.3.292–93, 3.3.206–8.
[48]Ibid., 1.3.292–93, 3.3.206–8.
[49]Matheson, "Venetian Culture," 76–78.
[50]Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet* is a good machiavellian, although his plan ends in disaster; Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* a very ambiguous one.
[51]*Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.339–59.

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these assertions of love and choice have the political significance of a challenge to patriarchal authority (the question is not "whether politics?" but "which?").

Sovereign Authority. In *Othello* Iago's machiavellian style is contrasted with the politics of the statesmen, and also with the exemplary enactment of state sovereignty, the final and highest power. Lodovico and Gratiano visit Cyprus from Venice and find themselves in the midst of violence. The enormity of the situation builds—Desdemona murdered by Othello.[52] Emilia's accusation of Iago and Iago's stabbing of Emilia.[53] Between them they articulate a range of voices—outraged shock at violence and evil,[54] reason and caution in their attempts to intervene with Othello,[55] the moral voice of reasoned sorrowful judgment regarding Othello's fall.[56] They can finally explain to Othello—"Here is a letter…"[57]—about the powers that have assailed and ruined him and Desdemona. Finally, Lodovico voices state authority: "Your power and your command is taken off and Cassio rules in Cyprus."[58] State authority is not adequate to prevent the mayhem, or Othello's suicide, but it can decree that Iago be tortured: "To you, lord governor [Cassio], remains the censure of this hellish villain—the time, the place, the torture—O enforce it; myself will straight aboard, and to the state this heavy act with heavy heart relate."[59] The voice of the state is articulated at the end, but Shakespeare takes an ironic look at sovereignty which is never final nor decisive, nor transcendent. Here it is too late to prevent the tragedy, although in time to voice the promise of order in future—but which audiences of Shakespeare's plays are going to leave the theater really believing that all will end peacefully and prosperously under a regime of good rule, in Venice, or Vienna, or Denmark?

The politics that opens the play—the statesmanship, the open bestowal of office on Othello, the accommodation of Othello's family and social relationships, the political assertion of Othello's position in the state and society notwithstanding the racism of the society that hosts him—are displaced by Iago's vengeance, passion, cunning, and cruelty. Iago is corrupt in political terms because he does not meet his fellow human beings in all their difference and uniqueness, he does not consider the commitment and the trust that must lie at the heart of any political institution, including the state, nor does he act so as to maintain that commitment and trust. The state, in the end, will punish him and reassert sovereign office—but this kind of politics

[52]*Othello*, 5.2.167.
[53]Ibid., 5.2.231–3.
[54]Ibid., 5.2.222–23.
[55]Ibid., 5.2.253.
[56]Ibid., 5.2.288.
[57]Ibid., 5.2.305–15.
[58]Ibid., 5.2.327–28.
[59]Ibid., 5.2.366–70.

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can seem an inefficacious, marginal thing. However, let us remember, in the context of Venice: no state—no officers, or ships, or military camps or colonies; no marriage or dowry. State politics might be the frame, but the frame here constitutes the scene that is brought into view.

Friendship. Portia's machiavellian political style contrasts with Shakespeare's skeptical look at the sovereign power of the Duke, and also with his ironic look at what we can call the "politics of friendship" in the trading republic. Friendship has a paradoxical place in relation to politics. It is both eminently a political relationship, contrasted to kinship and also to the self-interested exchange of the market place. It is the key relationship for polity, inhering between people who meet as equals and openly. But in other constructions it is the opposite of politics—a relationship of trust and openness contrasted to suspicions, hidden agendas, and dirty hands.[60] Or, in more modern times, it is thought of as a private relationship, to be contrasted with the public realm of law and economy. Shakespeare is a significant representor of the new sense of intimacy in friendship, which transcends and is distant from public, formal, relations.[61] If the argument of this paper that Shakespeare plays with contested ideas of politics is correct, then it equally is the case that the plays rehearse contested ideas of friendship.

Antonio and Bassanio's friendship involves intimacy, truth, and care for the other. Friendly relations also underpin the public political life of the trading republic. But the society is conflicted religiously, racially, ethnically, this conflict uneasily settled by the devices of special permissions to the Jews, and the segregated residence of the ghetto. The Jews are indispensable for their provision of financial services that the Christian Venetians are proscribed from providing for themselves, but that does not prevent their being reviled as providers of those services. The conflict is articulated, daily according to Shylock's testimony and reproaches, in the friendships between the Christian merchants, and their antipathy and antagonism to the Jewish financiers.

These are not deep or obscure interpretations of Shakespeare's text. The critique of the social relations, and the political structure, of the trading republic is straightforwardly articulated by Shylock. Antonio repudiates the practice of usury, while needing to borrow from Shylock.[62] In a republic where civic

[60]Evert van der Zweerde, "Friendship and the Political," in "Friendship in Politics," ed. Preston King, special issue, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2007): 147–49; see also other papers in that issue and in "The Challenge of Friendship in Modernity," ed. Preston King, special issue, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (1999)

[61]This idea is associated with Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, *On Friendship*, trans. John Florio (London: Dent, 1965); *Essays*, ed. L. C. Harmer (New York: Dutton, 1980), 1:195–207. On the relevance of Montaigne for readings of Shakespeare in general, see Grady, "Shakespeare's Links."

[62]*Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.58–67.

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friendship is the basic political relationship, Antonio voices the civic enmity between the dominant Christian citizens and the subordinate Jewish denizens.

> SHY. Many a time and oft in the Rialto you have rated me. … And spit upon my Jewish gabardine … you spat on me on Wednesday last; you spurned me such a day; another time you called me dog. …
> ANT. I am as like to call thee so again, to spit on thee again, to spurn thee, too.[63]

There is no friendship across religious lines in this market place:

> ANT. If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not as to thy friends; for when did friendship take a breed for barren metal of his friend? But lend it rather to thine enemy who, if he break, thou mayst with better face exact the penalty.[64]

In this bitter context Shylock is faced with the dilemma of friendliness. To be friendly is to conduct oneself "as if" one were a friend. But how far does this "as if" take one? In citizenship, and in the market, it is consistent with quite impersonal relations. In a physical market place bodily contact—the shaking of hands, the exchange of goods—is called for, as is a certain level of pleasant conversation. As we have seen, Antonio has spat on and abused Shylock. Shylock knows the cultural and political limits of economic friendliness: "Why, look you, how you storm! I would be friends with you and have your love"[65] is both consistent, and in tension, with "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, and walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you."[66] Nevertheless, invited to dinner[67] he feels constrained—because of the cultural and emotional implications of his economic transaction with Antonio—to accept. And we know what disaster strikes his house while he is out. These exchanges between Shylock and Antonio, and Shylock's dilemma of friendliness, clearly press the problem, the paradox, of civic friendship, republican equality, the rights and status of citizens as opposed to denizens.[68]

Social Contestations. Shakespeare's characters range from such articulation of the contradictions and oppressions of political power, to explicit opposition to it. We can judge Iago within the frame of ethics, straightforwardly. But we

[63]Ibid., 1.3.103–27.
[64]Ibid., 1.3.128–33.
[65]Ibid., 1.3.133–34.
[66]Ibid., 1.3.33–35.
[67]Ibid., 1.3.30.
[68]The plot of Portia's testing the strength of her marriage bond with Bassanio by asking him (while she is disguised as the lawyer) to give away the ring also dramatizes the tension between friendship and marriage (4.1.421–50).

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are forced by the text, by his language, and by his own account of his motivations, to see him also as a member of a society, a man with a particular status, who participates in a particular economy, culture, system of occupations and ranks, and who is a citizen. Iago is the society's own challenge to its own openness and meritocracy, with his debts and economic interests and reasoning,[69] his misogyny, and sexual jealousy.[70]

Portia is oppressed by her confinement at Belmont, and the situation her father has bequeathed to her whereby she has to await a marital partner who will win her in a game of chance with an admixture of skill. Portia may not choose, nor may she refuse a husband she dislikes, "so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father."[71] In voicing this complaint, of course, Portia makes plain the contradictions of patriarchy, proclaims her own status as agent with will, states the negative effects of oppression on individuals—"My little body is aweary of this great world."[72] Jessica, too, is subject to her father's authority—when he is out, and the masques are on, she is not to look out on the public street.[73] His culture must be hers. Both are confined by a structure of authority and power; both throw it off, evade it—with elopement and conversion from Judaism to Christianity, and theft of her father's wealth, in Jessica's case; by trickery, disguise, in Portia's. The representation of these resistances in Shakespeare's dramas goes with the grain of some aspects of Elizabethan social change, in which the rights of individuals, the sovereignty of self—for women too—were being asserted, and new relationships of market exchange were displacing older values.

Voice. Emilia's struggle against patriarchal power takes a different form from Portia's. She, like Desdemona, is undone by the patriarchal values, which deprive her of independent voice and autonomous judgment. In 3.3, Emilia gives Iago the handkerchief, as he has asked her to: "what he will do with it heaven knows, not I,"[74] "I nothing but to please his fantasy"[75] at a point when she seems to be utterly controlled by Iago's controlling violence supported by the patriarchal norms of marriage. However, her autonomous friendship with Desdemona is signaled by her ability to sympathize with Cassio[76] and give him assurances from Desdemona regarding her intercession with Othello about Cassio's job. In 4.3 the friendship between the two women comes to a climax in their political and intimate conversation about

[69]*Othello*, 1.3.356, 371–72.
[70]Ibid., 1.3.375–79.
[71]*Merchant of Venice*, 1.2.22–24.
[72]Ibid., 1.2.1–2.
[73]Ibid., 2.5.29–32.
[74]*Othello*, 3.3.297–98.
[75]Ibid., 3.3.299.
[76]Ibid., 3.1.41–55.

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men, women, sex, and marriage, about male violence[77] and about male dominance in marriage. This does not make sense, they argue—women are moral, and flawed, individuals like men, not chattel.[78]

Between obeying Iago in the matter of the handkerchief and being killed by him, Emilia begins to suspect, to understand, that someone is calumnying Desdemona. When she first arrives, with Desdemona, on Cyprus, Emilia is silent and diffident in response to Iago's misogynist "jest" about her tongue. Desdemona, at the time, takes the joke humorously: "alas, she has no speech."[79] Later Emilia regrets that her free speech, on behalf of Cassio, has got her far into a trouble that she cannot understand.[80] During her confrontation with Othello after he has fatally injured Desdemona, Emilia switches from her initial deferential address to him as "my lord" to calling him a devil as a riposte to his accusation that Desdemona is a whore.[81] When Othello tells her that Iago "knew" that Cassio and Desdemona were false to him, that Iago was the informant, then Emilia understands. When she challenges Iago, he tells her to be quiet, but Emilia has a right to speak, she is "bound" to speak.[82] She can ask the representatives of the state of Venice, directly, for permission to speak, irrespective of Iago's orders or interests: "Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak: 'tis proper I obey him, but not now."[83] As Othello's distressed account to the Venetians continues, she goes on, taking implicit permission, or right, from the state of Venice: "'Twill out, 'twill out; I peace! No, I will speak as liberal as the north: let heaven and men and devils, let them all, all, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak."[84] Emilia dies speaking: "So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true; so speaking as I think, alas, I die",[85] poignantly echoing Desdemona's "alas, she has no speech" in their earlier confused encounter with Iago.[86]

One reason why people do not like politicians is that they do not say, exactly, what they mean, and they do not mean what they say. In this way,

[77]Ibid., 4.3.85–90.
[78]Ibid., 4.3.93–103.
[79]Ibid., 2.1.103.
[80]*Othello*, 3.4.128–29.
[81]Ibid., 5.2.130–34.
[82]Ibid., 5.2.184.
[83]Ibid., 5.2.195–96.
[84]Ibid., 5.2.217–21.
[85]Ibid., 5.2.250–51.
[86]Ibid., 2.1.96–108. Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 120–23 argues that the jokes about women's tongues would have been commonplace, with bawdy overtones, for Elizabethan audiences; in combination with the sexual ambiguity of women like Emilia and Desdemona being played by boys, the whole effect of this aspect of the plot and action, and Emilia's death as punishment for speaking, would provoke laughter, and affirm cultural and social prejudices.

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the simple lucid moments of truth in Shakespeare's dramas might be read as testimony to a profoundly antipolitical aspect of his work. Speeches like Portia's paeon to mercy[87] and Shylock's humanist plea[88] seem to take us, precisely, out of the "political" aspects of the actions and speeches of the play—they are poetry, they are ethics, they are humanist philosophy (including Shylock's "The villainy you teach me I will execute"[89]). Such speeches are endlessly read, and quoted, because of their quality of truth, as well as their beauty. By contrast, when we act politically there is a gap between being and seeming. This can be for good ends—as when we consider the effects of our words on our audience, and tailor our speech accordingly. Or it can be for bad, as in the case of Iago.

But the example of Emilia's speech—embodying and articulating the assertion of right, as well as statement of fact—is a brilliant example of a paradox of free speech as a political value. Free speech requires an appropriate political and social context, if it is to be heard, and heard in time. Emilia, in her last words, politicizes—nearly—the personal tangle of misunderstanding between Othello, Iago, Desdemona, Cassio, and herself.[90]

My analysis so far has been focused on the interpretation of text and plot, trying to set out some of what Shakespeare shows and what he tells about "politics." In the two Venetian plays we see something of the repertoire of political roles characters can play, something of how their capacities for domination, exploitation, and oppression—or for egalitarianism, reciprocity, freedom, and action in concert—intersect with their positions and resources. There are numerous countervailing pulls. In *Merchant of Venice*—between homosocial friendship and heterosexual marriage, between religious community and antagonism, and civic heterogeneity. Between markets and profits, and the rule of law on which they depend. Between ethics—the doubtful ethics of Shylock's insistence on claiming his bond, of Portia's use of discriminatory law to destroy Shylock, of Portia's testing her husband's loyalty to his marriage against his loyalty to friendship and to social debt.

Resolution of the tensions between these countervailing pulls is often nearly political. Nearly, Emilia voices decisive public speech in front of the representatives of the state (but she is cut down by violence). Nearly, the Duke might prevail on Shylock to settle out of court (but Shylock's desire

[87]*Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.181–99.

[88]Ibid., 3.1.55–69.

[89]Ibid., 3.1.67–68.

[90]There is a similar moment of near politicization, which does not come off because of the severity of machiavellian distortion, market logic, the workings of women's disempowerment, in *Measure for Measure*—when Isabella attempts publicly to accuse Angelo to the Duke, whom she understands to be the bearer of sovereign authority. But the Duke is engaged in machiavellian machinations, and the resolution of Isabella's (and other characters') dilemmas and near tragedies are deferred. She is enmeshed still further by power that she cannot understand (5.1.20–122).

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for revenge and Portia's legalistic reasoning resolve the issue after all). It might be thought that these ideas overlook and discount exactly the theatrical, dramatic, arc of Shakespeare's plots and plays. They can sound too much like a plea for common sense—to be rejected on dramatic grounds as we should reject the idea that Othello and Desdemona could have sat down and had a sensible, honest conversation about what was troubling them. If they had done that, there would be no play. But rather I want to argue that Shakespeare's plays are really good at showing the elusive, incomplete, fractured nature of political power—the ways that sovereignty is only ever almost exercised, the way that public decisive speech is only almost voiced. The machiavellian operators' plans are thwarted, or, like Portia, they pay the price of the ethical compromise of their dissimulation. The tensions that their machiavellian machinations are a response to—in Portia's case between friendship and marriage, between patriarchy and freedoms—are not resolved.

IV. Power, Politics, and Theater

As we have seen, the pressing parallels between stage and state, especially between the performance of sovereign authority (and, I would add, of other political roles and potentials) in public political settings and the enactment of dramas of power in Shakespearean and similar theater, have been interpreted both as potentially destabilizing political actors' claims to legitimacy and to rule, and also as demonstrating to audiences that political power is not to be gainsaid.[91] Theater audiences consider the relationship between the ordinary human being (the professional actor, the ambitious or chosen individual) and the role or the office. Greenblatt argues, though, that people were used to seeing the queen from afar, glimpsed between the heads of the crowd, in obviously staged appearances—"theatricality … is one of power's essential modes."[92] The performances of kings and princes on stage were distant and artificial in exactly the same way. The theater dazzles and disempowers audience members as state sovereignty does subjects.

Now between a liberationist, unmasking story here, and a quietist story of the given and self-concealing nature of power, we can emphasize instead how the stage and the play articulate to people what we know already—for we are political actors too. But this "already knownness" does not mean that theater

[91]Kastan, "Proud Majesty Made Subject"; Montrose, "Shakespeare, Stage and State"; Howard, "Dramatic Traditions and Shakspeare's Political Thought"; Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets," in *Political Shakespeare*, ed. Dollimore and Sinfield, 25–45, also in Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 21–65; Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (London: Methuen, 1986).

[92]Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets," 33, 43–44.

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leaves everything as it is. The articulation of political power—sovereignty and statesmanship, public voice, the possibility of action in concert that proceeds from friendship or citizenship, machiavellian craftiness, resistance to unjust or unjustified authority—as fractured and elusive is important. So is the understanding, that proceeds from consideration of our place in theater, of how it is distributed and multilayered.

When we are engaged as participant in theater—whether as actor, producer, critic, audience member—a crucial aspect of our participation is consciousness of the multilayered set of performances, of validity claims, and of meanings. This complex consciousness that we have as theatergoers—and as political actors—discloses the dispersed, elusive nature of political power. Whether playing the part of sovereign, or that of protestor, of machiavellian trickster or truth speaker, the actor does not have clear authority over self or others—but has to treat with others nevertheless. The actors rehearse and practice, and then perform, lines that are prewritten—although the lines on the page do not determine the nature of the performance or the meaning of the words and actions. These meanings are clarified only with hindsight—neither writer's nor actor's intention is sufficient, for there is interpretation and interaction with other characters—and subject always to questioning and reinterpretation long after the performance. There is no certainty about the meaning, let alone the outcome, of the words spoken and the actions.

The theatricality of lots of Shakespeare's characters is, of course, a characteristic mark of his work. Iago the villain plays the friendly, good-natured, trustworthy staff member. Portia plays the part of a male lawyer. Elizabethan audiences watched a boy actor play a female character impersonating a male character. Analogously, when as political actors we observe a candidate for office, comment on the administration of government policy, or participate in a deliberative meeting, we must be conscious of both the gap and the relationship between the person—who they are—and the role—what they say and do. Our judgment is multiply focused—on the process by which a decision-making body makes a certain decision; on the decision and its own drama; and on what it means, what will happen next.

At the self-same time as we remark on Othello's agony, his fear of his own humiliation, we remark on the actor's performance of these (and the scriptwriter's skill at articulating and expressing them). Just as Othello fails to know Desdemona in the right way, when he gives way to Iago's commonplace and wicked slurs on women's sexual characters, and when he demands proof of her fidelity,[93] so as participants in theater and in politics, we fail to understand what is going on, in the right way, if we do not

[93]Stanley Cavell, "Othello and the Stake of the Other," in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 125–42 emphasizes the corruption in Othello's wish for certainty about, and refusal to know, Desdemona.

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apprehend the complex layers of practice, rehearsal, performance, and action. The telling and performance of the story on the page or stage, the story that the play unfolds, its interaction with other stories, and a shifting sense of its meaning, are simultaneously the objects of our attention. As participants in an audience we judge Desdemona and Othello, and the others, and the points at which their understandings and actions go wrong and right. In politics, our choices—to ally or align ourselves one way rather than another, to vote in a certain way—must be preceded by judgments that are based on our understanding of patterns of power, decisions made, the interplay between office and office holder, intended and unintended consequences, and on a shifting sense of meaning.

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