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Review Essay

The Philosopher's Literary Critic

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Leon Craig: *The Philosopher's English King: Shakespeare's "Henriad" as Political Philosophy.* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015. Pp. ix-xvi, 270.)

Leon Craig's five books are interrelated by a common approach: Craig writes of philosophic matters juxtaposing them with literary works, or one may reverse the order—whichever way, the exegesis proceeds in tandem. Moreover, he has intertwined the books in a sequential development. One can perceive Craig discovered his fountainhead in Plato. His first book, in 1993, *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's "Republic,"* has left its genetic pattern upon the next four, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" and "King Lear"* (2001), *The Platonian Leviathan* (2010), *Philosophy and the Puzzles of "Hamlet"* (2014), and his latest, *The Philosopher's English King: Shakespeare's "Henriad" as Political Philosophy* (2015). In this latest effort, Shakespeare is the philosopher and Henry V the best of Shakespeare's English kings. But you will not appreciate the extent and intricacy of Craig's web unless you recognize that Plato's thought, especially as that thought has been conveyed in *The Republic*, runs through every filament. To be precise, taking such themes of that dialogue as Socrates's notion of a tripartite human soul, his taxonomy of defective regimes, his all but best regime of "Guardians," and Socrates's ultimately best constitution, rule by a philosopher become king or king become philosopher, or only somewhat less improbably, a king become an understanding student of a counselor philosopher. Then, best self-government within the individual soul is likewise worked out in *The Republic* as Craig reads it. To my mind he has read Plato aright.

Yet in so doing he has discerned some truths hitherto not likely to have been discerned by other readers of the dialogue. For instance, according to Craig, Socrates's notion of the rational soul has not three but four dimensions, the fourth arising from dividing the spirited portion in two—one part moved by zeal for victory, the other by desire for honors. Or, with respect to the famous divided-line epistemology, Craig has discovered two additional ratios. These are not merely incidental refinements, for both discriminations entail sizeable consequences. In his subsequent *Platonian Leviathan*, Craig, with some assistance from Thucydides, has discovered in Plato what he considers an equivalent of the Hobbesian "state of nature." Yet in the midst of adding to our understanding of Plato and of Hobbes, this same book enables new insights into Melville's *Moby-Dick* as well as Conrad's *Heart of*

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Darkness. Thus all these studies can properly be deemed "Platonian." And, consequently, Craig conveys a perspective upon ancients and moderns that makes Plato more "modern" than we have been accustomed to think him, while making such a modern as Hobbes more closely affined with "ancients." One payoff from the reassessment: Craig helps one to see that Hobbes's state of nature wherein all war against all is a condition perpetually immanent to, not superseded by, civil society.

His last three books have brought this bifocal mode of interpretation to bear upon a reading of Shakespeare. The most rewarding of this triad is the earliest effort. Its superiority owed simply to his having there trained his lights upon *Lear* and *Macbeth*, the deepest of Shakespeare's plays. Nonetheless quite acute is his study of *Hamlet*. (Not to be missed, Craig's ingenious justification of what I have hitherto mistaken for an embarrassing imposition unworthy of the dramatist. The apparently ridiculous return of the Prince to Denmark via "pirates" we are to infer is in truth a rescue arranged by Hamlet's supporters.) My concern here, however, is with the latest of the Shakespeare books. Craig's reading of those History plays, comprising Shakespeare's "Second Tetralogy," affords an opportunity to illustrate Craig's approach while proposing his practice as a model for literary critics who aim to elucidate the political wisdom available in several of Shakespeare's dramas. (Besides *Macbeth* and *Lear* Craig's *Philosophers and Kings* had examined *Othello, The Winter's Tale*, and *Measure for Measure*.)

Craig conceives the unifying subject of the four plays to be the career of Henry Monmouth, hence the epic "Henriad" of his subtitle. Presently I will suggest his reading is an epic too far. It might be more accurate to say Shakespeare's subject is the conflict between the ideal of a British monarch on the one hand, and, on the other, what is practicable once we take into consideration the Christian character of Englishmen, their geopolitical situation, and then appreciate the trauma the realm has suffered from Bolingbroke's deposing of a legitimate king, followed by his usurpation of the sovereign authority. Craig shows himself quite capable of stating Shakespeare's argument as just formulated rather than as a heroic celebration of the man who would become Henry V (see 19–21). He makes a strong case, however, for Monmouth's astuteness, first, in perceiving England's peril to have had to witness the questioning of its assumption that God will save its (legitimate and anointed) kings. And, second, Craig argues persuasively for Monmouth's genius in devising and practicing new modes with new orders that not only provide for immediate relief from civil war but also promise more permanent benefits of regime improvement. The statecraft Craig attributes to this warrior-king he associates with the lesser (rule by "Guardians") of the two best constitutions Socrates had imagined in the *Republic*. That accomplishment Craig has explained by invoking Hobbes in support of Plato, here drawing upon a daring conjecture he had developed at length in *The Platonian Leviathan* where he had introduced a novel, well-reasoned reconsideration of Hobbes's "state of nature" doctrine. The crucial element of this revision of Hobbes had consisted in Craig's perceiving that Hobbes's condition of a "war of every man against every man" is not

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primarily to be understood to have occurred antecedent to civil society but must be seen as a constantly impending terror more to be dreaded than the condition (of dispersed families, not so solitary and, though poor and nasty enough, less brutal than internecine strife). Thus the Prince Hal we hear of at the end of *Richard II* and the pretended scofflaw we see prior to his coronation at the end of *2 Henry IV* we should approve of on the strength of his success in staging a moral transformation so stunning as to seem miraculous. Only such a politic coup de theatre could refocus public opinion, dampening indignation over the sacrilege committed by his father. He would redirect public wonder toward the future promised by a ruler stronger than the self-indulgent weakling Hal's father had dethroned, his rule made the more effective because unburdened from his father's illegality as usurper. Apparent wildness of mind and ungoverned spiritedness he puts aside in renouncing his truancy to chivalry when publicly he severs himself from Falstaff. Martial virtue and dedication to the commonweal he exhibits in overcoming Hotspur and, against general expectation, professing his confidence in the Lord Chief Justice. At the outset of his reign he wins over the clerical hierarchy. So when Harry invades France he leads a nation united in its races—English with hitherto rebellious Welsh, restive Scots, and even Irishmen—its royalty supported by loyal barons, both in union with yeomen, and its clergy at one with laity.

Craig attributes victory at Agincourt to its true cause, Henry's ability by one speech alone to raise to his own pitch his soldiers' desire to win fame. He does so by saying what is only too true, that "if it be a sin to covet honor / [he is] the most offending soul alive" (4.2.28–29). The noblemen among his followers want to be the same sort of "sinner." To the common soldiers he offers an additional savor. By their deeds in battle they will enjoy certainly every year on the day of commemorating the battle the gratification of an honor enlarged by their knowledge that men more nobly born than these yeomen will covet the honor these commoners will have earned at Agincourt. Spirited souls love victory and honor. Henry V will have both in a preeminent degree, as throughout his career he has arranged to have by risking everything in contriving his various spectacles—his phrase for what he means to arouse: "to be more wond'red at" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.189). But Harry's greatest achievement owes to his having recovered for his subjects what they had lost by his father's usurpation. He means to restore—presumably did restore for some of the more credulous—a trust in their king's enjoying divine favor. The difference between the old belief in providential favor held by Richard II and the revised version achieved by this "mirror of all Christian kings" (*Henry V*, 2 chorus 6) lies in the personal ground of the latter versus the institutional ground of the former. In the previous presumption, divine sponsorship attached to the office and hence to King qua King, or, if kings contend in war, the presumption, one may suppose, invests the English king. To whomsoever it attaches the theo-political doctrine sins by presuming upon the divine will. With Harry's renovation God now will be said to repose His favor in Henry V, in the man who fulfils the office. Harry's is a shrewd risk

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because if by his own strengths he fails to make good his claim he will be dead. If he succeeds he will prove not only his prowess but God's approval. So he had proclaimed when at the outset of the play he announces God had intervened to prevent his assassins (2.2.185–86) and as he proclaims after his victory when attributing the glory to God.

Craig persuasively argues for the pertinence of one part of Hobbes's teaching. He would find further Shakespearean evidence indicating human potential for creating a state of nature in four other sequential Histories Shakespeare had written prior to the Second Tetralogy but which depict an action immediately following the death of Henry Monmouth. These plays had depicted among other atrocities a son killing his father in battle, then a father killing his son (*3 Henry VI*, 2.6.55–72 and 80–93). Because these killings are unwitting, the abyss peered into by the First Tetralogy does not in this instance descend into the darkness Thucydides locates in the deliberate killings of closest kin during the Corcyrean civil war. But Shakespeare does arrive at an equivalency by extending to women a worse than feral cruelty (personified in Queen Margaret) and then in Richard III portrays the strongest of his rebels become the worst of his tyrants.

Craig owes us fellow travelers a stronger argument in support of his conviction that both Hobbes and Shakespeare take their bearings from Plato. Especially he should adduce further evidence that Henry V seeks to encourage his subjects in cultivation of moral virtue by starting a war in preference to his father's wiser plan to create a new aristocracy by taxing church landholdings. Craig's rejoinder that conquest must precede enacting the father's policy I find unpersuasive. Meaning to praise, the Chorus says Monmouth has set afire his countrymen's ambition for honor coupled with their desire for wealth to be acquired by seizing "the world's best garden" together with "crowns and coronets promised to Henry and his followers" (2.1–12). A prospect most likely to move the sort of monarch who would satisfy Hobbes, but to win approval of the Socrates who identifies the best of statesmanship with cultivating moral and intellectual virtue in rulers and ruled alike?

Perhaps so, if one accedes to Craig's argument for a Platonian Hobbes in his earlier book. Craig recognizes his view will be taken for a long question. Yet a dissenter from Craig's synoptic should acknowledge a responsibility with which Hobbes had charged those who disputed his *Leviathan*: to argue against "with the same care which [Hobbes] took to write it." Dissenting from Craig requires the disputant's exercising his utmost capacities for philosophical reflection. Whatever their differences in other respects the three thinkers would endorse that undertaking. Because Craig rightly conceives the philosophic poet and the two philosophers display a common concern to put above their every other purpose the preservation and encouragement of philosophy. The argument seems to compel me to an unanticipated conclusion: the chief merit of Craig's thinking lies in his having proceeded from commentary upon poems and philosophical writings, to creating conversation between these thinkers with the purpose of measuring each by its counterpart, to philosophical speculation contemplating the things themselves.

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