Shakespeare, Essex, and Machiavelli

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In *The Elizabethan World Picture*, E.M.W. Tillyard outlined a system of belief to which Shakespeare, along with his fellow Elizabethans, is supposed to have adhered. This system of belief had a political component. In the "World Picture" defined by Tillyard, a hereditary monarch assumed his or her natural place of rule among men as part of a divinely guided Great Chain of Being.[1] We can certainly see the first tetralogy as embodying the essentially medieval political consciousness defined by Tillyard. The carnage and suffering of the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* can be blamed on those characters who upset the Great Chain of Being by attempting to seize and hold the throne by their own will and not by divine right. The political consciousness of the second tetralogy, however, does not so easily conform to Tillyard's World Picture. In these plays, Richard II, a weak hereditary monarch, is deposed by Bolingbroke, an able usurper. The usurper is not punished for this offense to the Great Chain of Being, but instead prospers and is followed on the throne by a son who is a model of effective kingship. I believe that the political consciousness of the second tetralogy owes much to the political thought of Machiavelli. I also believe that this Machiavellian (and throughout this essay I will use the word "Machiavellian" in the literal sense of having been inspired directly by Machiavelli) consciousness served the plays of the second tetralogy in what I believe to have been their function as propaganda for the party of Essex in the years leading up to the Essex Rebellion.

The particular notion that the political consciousness of Shakespeare's plays, and of the second tetralogy in particular, could be informed by Machiavelli is one that developed gradually and against much resistance during the twentieth century. For many years, scholars assumed that Shakespeare had little access to genuine Machiavellian thought and that his major sources of information were materials produced in connection with the anti-Machiavelli hysteria that followed the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. This

view was largely developed by Edward Meyer who, in 1897, identified the *Contre-Machiavel* of Innocent Gentillet as the work which actually taught the Elizabethan dramatists what they knew about Machiavelli. The *Contre-Machiavel* was, as its name implied, an anti-Machiavelli diatribe in which Gentillet accuses Machiavelli of being an advocate *"de mepris de Dieu, de perfidie, de sodomi, tyrannie, cruaute, pilleris, usures estranger et autres vices detestable."*[2] This image of Machiavelli, Meyer asserted, informed Elizabethan drama and produced such stage Machiavels as Marlowe's Barabas and Shakespeare's Richard III.

The idea that Elizabethan drama was informed exclusively by Gentillet's distorted, second-hand concept of Machiavelli was for many years embraced by critics. Mario Praz developed an analogy to the American "Red Scare" of the 1950's in which he suggested that, because of the predominance of hysterical anti-Machiavelli propaganda, it was as impossible for Elizabethans to have access to the actual thoughts of Machiavelli as it was for Americans during the McCarthy era to have access to the actual thoughts of Karl Marx.[3] E.M.W. Tillyard wrote that when examining the political-historical context in which Shakespeare's plays were written, "we do not need give much heed to Machiavelli. His day had not yet come."[4]

The idea that Elizabethan dramatists had no direct access to Machiavelli was perhaps first discredited by Felix Raab in 1964. Meyer had based his assertion of the primacy of Gentillet's *Contre-Machiavel* over Machiavelli's own works in the minds of Elizabethans on the fact that Gentillet's book was published in English in 1577 while *The Prince* and *The Discorsi* were not published in English until 1640 and 1636 respectively. Raab points out that publishing records were not a fair indication of a work's popularity since the science of printing was itself in infancy during this period and many manuscript copies of Machiavelli's works in Italian, Latin, French and English circulated throughout Elizabethan England.[5]

That Meyer's assertion of the primacy of the *Contre-Machiavel* over the actual works of Machiavelli could have been accepted for so long on such flimsy evidence says a great deal about the nature of Shakespearean interpretation in the first half of the twentieth century. Critics like Tillyard wanted to believe that Shakespeare had no direct contact with Machiavelli's work because such contact would call into question the idea of Shakespeare's participation in an Elizabethan World Picture which accepted as dogma the concepts of hereditary monarchy and the divine right of kings. As Jonathan Dollimore pointed out, Anglo-American literary criticism in the twentieth century was obsessed with the notion of

order: "Believing their society to be in decline or dangerously off course, many literary critics in the English tradition have seen as even more imperative than usual their task of re-affirming the universal values associated with man's essential nature."[6] Although Dollimore here writes specifically about these critics' vision of Shakespeare as supporting traditional humanist and essentialist philosophical values, this same statement could equally apply to their vision of Shakespeare as supporting the traditional political values of hereditary monarchy and the divine right of kings.

Much critical writing suggests that the plays of Shakespeare, particularly the later plays including the second tetralogy, demonstrate a political consciousness directly informed by Machiavelli. As Rolf Soellner wrote, "We can now safely discard the previously held belief that all this repulsion and attraction came merely from misconceptions about Machiavelli's actual arguments through their distortions in hostile reactions such as Innocent Gentillet's *Contre-Machiavel*."[7] Barbara Riebling argues that the political fortunes of the characters of *Macbeth* are governed by Machiavelli's principles as articulated in *The Prince*.[8] Anne Barton shows that *Coriolanus* owes as much to Machiavelli's *Discorsi* as it does to Livy. Of Machiavelli's influence on Shakespeare, Barton concludes, "I think myself that it would be more surprising if it could be proved that Shakespeare had managed to avoid reading Machiavelli than if concrete evidence were to turn up that he had."[9]

If Shakespeare's plays written after 1594 display a political consciousness directly informed by Machiavelli, this would conform to a pattern in the chronological development of Shakespeare's plays observed by G.P.V. Akrigg. Akrigg points out that the early plays (which he defines as *Titus Andronicus*, *Comedy of Errors*, and the first historical tetralogy) were by and large crude works set in medieval Britain or the ancient world and peopled with simply drawn characters who behaved according to the limitations of their plays' respective genres. After 1594, however, Shakespeare began to write plays set in Italy in which the characters took on new dimensions of realism, complexity, and vitality. Akrigg attributes this change to the period of approximately two years when theaters were largely closed due to plague and censorship and during which Shakespeare may have lived as poet-in-residence in the household of his patron, the Earl of Southampton.[10] Southampton was the most Italianate of Elizabethan courtiers. His household included John Florio, the Earl's tutor of Italian and the author of a popular Italian-English dictionary. It would not have been surprising if Shakespeare, living in this atmosphere full of things Italian, became

familiar with the writings of the most famous (and infamous) Italian of the century, Niccoló Machiavelli.

Through Southampton, a connection may be established between Shakespeare and the Earl of Essex. As stated above, my intention is partly to demonstrate how the second tetralogy can be seen as advocating the political cause of Essex, a cause that led to open rebellion in 1601. I believe that the Machiavellian political consciousness of these plays supports this advocacy. Essex' followers believed that the Earl was a man fit to rule, not because he was born a king but rather because, like Machiavelli's ideal Prince, he understood the practical requirements of kingship. Likewise, Shakespeare's usurper Henry IV and the usurper's son, Henry V, rule by use of their practical talents and not by divine right. Shakespeare's Richard II, on the other hand, believes himself imbued with a divine right, but neglects the practical requirements of kingship as defined by Machiavelli in *The Prince* and, consequently, fails as a king.

History has not been kind to the Earl of Essex. The dismal failure of the 1601 rebellion, coupled with the Earl's legendary fits of temper and moodiness, have made him something of a laughing stock to posterity. Yet to fully understand Essex' relevance to the political content of the second tetralogy, one must consider what the Earl represented to the men of his "party," a party that included as "chief among the Essex circle" Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton.[11] In a sense, Essex being, as Robert Lacey wrote, "ahead of his time, he appealed for a popular support and sought an eminence over his sovereign no man of the sixteenth century had dared to claim."[12] This is not to suggest that Essex was some visionary forerunner of modern democratic thought. As Lytton Strachey pointed out, Essex embodied the contradictions of his age.[13] Fiercely devoted to the code of chivalry, Essex issued challenges of personal combat to the defenders of Lisbon and Rouen, reminiscent of Hotspur's challenges to Prince Hal in *Henry IV, Part One.* Yet at the same time he was only the second Earl of Essex, and the newness of his title is indicative of his place among the new breed of courtiers who came to court to advance themselves through upward mobility.[14]

In spite of his contradictions and personal weaknesses, the Earl of Essex represented a vision of a new political order to his followers. Although his military record left much to be desired, Essex had a reputation among the people as a great warrior and was immensely popular. We must remember that while history has granted Elizabeth the status of a legendary ruler, towards the

end of her reign she was far from universally admired. Her rule, and in particular her foreign policy, was marked by hesitation and indecision. Her success seemed to owe as much to luck (and in the case of the Armada, to weather) as it did to policy.[15] To the extent that an Early Modern society like the Elizabethan had a military establishment, Essex and his followers were representative of that establishment. Their reaction to Elizabeth's abandonment of the beloved colonial possession of Calais in 1596 was similar to the reaction of the French military establishment to the abandonment of Algeria in 1961—they decided to stage a military coup.

Essex was for many years the patron of Francis Bacon, who in turn was an ardent champion of Machiavelli, writing that "We are much beholden to Machiavelli and to others who write what men do and not what they ought to do."[16] According to Lytton Strachey, "Bacon wished his patron to behave with the Machiavellian calculation that was natural to his own mind" and chastised the Earl for having no talent at dissimulation.[17] Clearly, Bacon recommended a Machiavellian course for the Earl of Essex. Whether this course included the deposing of Elizabeth or merely the securing of a greater role for the Earl of Essex within her government is not certain. The effort of a subject, albeit an Earl, to force his will upon his sovereign represented a clear violation of the Elizabethan World Picture proposed by Tillyard and others. Yet Essex's followers urged him to make just such an effort which, in the end, he made with disastrous results in 1601.

Just as many critics have pointed out the influence of a Machiavellian political consciousness on the second tetralogy and on *Henry V* in particular, some critics have also written about the influence of the Essex party on these same plays. Thomas Jameson writes,

> In 1599-1600 the eye of the dramatist Shakespeare may have been focused upon fifteenth-century France, but that does not mean that what he saw was uncolored by events close to home. To rule this out is to deny him what we do no other author or artist, the right to have lived in a certain time in history and in a certain place. The summers of 1598 and 1599 were times of particular unrest in London. In the space of a "big" (pregnant) year, Lord Burghley had died, and the reins of government had been handed over to his physically small and somewhat misshapen son, Robert Cecil; the Earl of Essex, his rival for Elizabeth's favor, found himself unwilling Lord Deputy in Ireland. One of Essex's grievances was that for his patriotic hostility to the Spanish he had come to be rumored a warmonger, and now he found himself prosecuting an unpopular war. His friend,

> the Earl of Southampton—Shakespeare's patron—accompanied him, doing so against the wishes of the queen.[18]

Jameson goes on to conclude that "Shakespeare and others of the Lord Chamberlain's players were 'Essex men.'"[19] Jameson appears to believe, as do I, that the second tetralogy and *Henry V* in particular can be read as an attack on the existing political status quo by an active partisan of a political figure that challenged that same status quo. I differ from Jameson, however, in how this attack was carried out. Jameson believes that *Henry V* is a "burlesque" in which the theme of ideal kingship is parodied and satirized.[20] I do not wish to oversimplify Jameson's well developed argument, but I believe that it can be summarized as the notion that Shakespeare, writing under the pressure of extreme censorship, wrote *Henry V* to be read ironically. Jameson seems to feel that we can not take Henry V seriously as an ideal ruler because he behaves so abominably. Jameson therefore extrapolates that *Henry V* is an indictment of the existing power structure of Shakespeare's age. I agree that *Henry V* is such an indictment, but I think it proposes its protagonist as a positive alternative to that power structure rather than as a negative representative of it. I believe that Henry V is an ideal ruler because he applies the precepts laid out for such a ruler by Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Jameson seizes on these precepts to make his case that *Henry V* is a burlesque that should be read ironically.

An indication of Jameson's unwillingness to embrace what I perceive to be the second tetralogy's Machiavellian political consciousness can be found in his reaction to Henry IV's deathbed injunction to Hal to "busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels" (4.5.211-216).[21]

> ...it is the stark, unadorned principle. A good ruler does not open hostilities with his neighbor as a means of coping with ills at home...Yet Shakespeare is supposed to have written a play on such a theme. By many he is supposed to have written it in a spirit of total approval.[22]

Yet this kind of behavior is specifically endorsed by Machiavelli in *The Prince* when he writes, "A wise prince must, whenever he has the occasion, foster with cunning some hostility so that in stamping it out his greatness will increase as a result."[23] Likewise, Jameson identifies Henry's declaration of his willingness to risk all to win France in Act I with the motto of Machiavelli's hero, Cesare Borgia, "Caesar or nothing!" Yet he writes that such an idea is a "strange

admission" to come from a character who is supposed to represent an ideal ruler.[24]

Jameson's vision of *Henry V* as a burlesque that should be read ironically is not without merit or logic. I submit, however, that it would be a very difficult vision to bring to life on stage. A production that sought to support Jameson's vision would need to stage much of the action of the play against a literal reading of the text. An example of such a production might be the *Henry V* staged by Chicago Shakespeare (then called Shakespeare Repertory) in 1998.[25] In order to show that the play was not an exercise in feel-good patriotism, this production brought forth the slaughter of the French prisoners on stage in a gruesome manner. Fluellen and Gower were furious at Henry for killing the prisoners and delivered their subsequent praise of the king through clenched teeth in a manner that obviously belied the literal sense of what they were saying. Throughout the 1998 Chicago Shakespeare *Henry V*, characters commented on their lines in this manner. Such a production indulges in the twentieth-century notion of "subtext," a concept wherein characters say one thing while meaning something else. Having studied Shakespearean acting at the Shakespeare Theater's Acting Conservatory, The Theater Conservatory at Roosevelt University, and with such companies as the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, I think I can say that a consensus today exists among experts in the field that subtext is anathema to acting Shakespeare. This is because in Shakespeare characters generally mean what they say and say what they mean. If a Shakespearean character is going to dissemble, he will often first have a soliloquy in which he says to the audience, in effect, "Watch me, I'm going to dissemble now!" When Shakespeare is played in a subtextual manner, that is to say, when the characters on stage consistently mean something other than what they are saying, the result is usually disastrous. This was the case in the 1998 Chicago Shakespeare *Henry V*. The audience was confused, and the production was a critical and popular failure.

I believe that my vision of the second tetralogy, in which Henry V is seen as an ideal ruler in the Machiavellian mode, could be staged clearly and literally without forcing the actors to "ironically" play against the text. I believe that such a vision attacks the existing power structure of Shakespeare's time as strongly as does Jameson's ironic vision. Henry V, as a ruler, does not represent hereditary monarchy in action. Rather, as the opportunistic son of an equally opportunistic usurper, he represents an example of the forces opposed to hereditary monarchy. Perhaps my political vision of

the second tetralogy could be made clear by a stage production that used, as a design metaphor, the rise of Benito Mussolini. Bolingbroke's seizure of power in *Richard II* closely parallels Mussolini's march on Rome in 1922. Henry V's tenuously justified invasion of France and subsequent triumph closely parallel the Duce's campaign in Ethiopia. And the final speech of the Chorus in *Henry V*, a speech that laments the short-lived nature of the conqueror's success, surely would make sense if delivered in front of a tableau in which the body of Henry V hung upside down like the corpse of Mussolini in Milan. The goal of such a production would be neither to provide an apology for fascism nor to ironically undercut the heroic stature of the Henrys. Rather it would be to show how, throughout history, men like Bolingbroke, Borgia, Essex, and Mussolini have used Machiavellian principles in an attempt to seize and hold power and how their relative success has been guided, as Machiavelli predicted, by fortune and their abilities.

During Essex' lifetime, much was made of an analogy between the Earl of Essex and Bolingbroke, the usurper who became Henry IV. John Hayward was put into the tower for dedicating a history of Henry IV to Essex.[26] The request by the Essex rebels to have Shakespeare's company stage *Richard II* on the day before the ill-fated rebellion was only the climax of a protracted cultural metaphor in which Elizabeth was seen as Richard II and Essex as Bolingbroke. As legend has it, Elizabeth herself once said, "I am Richard II, know ye that."[27] To fully understand the function of the second tetralogy as propaganda for Essex, however, one must follow the story of Richard II and Bolingbroke to its conclusion in *Henry V*. The fact that *Henry V* celebrates the victory of an usurper's policy through the success of his son seems to validate a political conception which is not tied to the medieval notion of the divine right of kings. If the usurper Bolingbroke could triumph, why couldn't the usurper Essex?

The character of Chorus may be seen as a key to understanding the politically didactic nature of *Henry V*. In *Radical Tragedy*, Jonathan Dollimore writes, "Brecht in fact figures prominently in my argument to the effect that a significant sequence of Jacobean tragedies, including the majority of Shakespeare's, were more radical than has hitherto been allowed."[28] While all Elizabethan theater was, by modern standards, Brechtian in its metatheatricality, the character of the Chorus in *Henry V* was a particularly Brechtian device. He provided an effect of alienation even greater than that normally experienced by an Elizabethan audience by constantly reminding them that they were in a theater watching a play. This

alienation allowed the Chorus to fulfill his second Brechtian function which was to didactically instruct the audience as to the play's political message: a call for strong leadership without regards to hereditary title. I believe that this message advocated both the political thought of Machiavelli and the cause of the Essex rebels. The immediate political message of the play for Shakespeare's contemporary audience, that of support for Essex, is outlined by Chorus at the beginning of Act Five. Speaking of Henry's triumphant return from France, the Chorus says,

> But now behold
> In the quick forge and working-house of thought,
> How London doth pour out her citizens:
> The Mayor and all his brethren in best sort,
> Like to the senators of th'antique Rome,
> With the plebians swarming at their heels,
> Go forth and fetch their conquering Caesar in:
> As, by a lower but loving likelihood,
> Were now the General of our gracious Empress—
> As in good time he may—From Ireland coming,
> Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,
> How many would the peaceful city quit
> To welcome him ! Much more, and much more cause,
> Did they this Harry. (5.1.22-26)

The Essex reference so readily apparent has been duly noted by critics and editors. At the time *Henry V* was written, shortly before the Essex rebellion, Essex was in Ireland attempting to pacify the island for Elizabeth. The uprising of Tyrone, an Irish chieftain, was the rebellion which Essex was sent to Ireland to "broach" on his sword. But what if we take an alternate meaning of broach as not "to pierce" but "to make known for the first time"? Might we not then read a double sense into the "rebellion" which is referred to? And what of the reference to "conquering Caesar"? If Henry is compared to Caesar and Henry is compared to Essex, then Essex can be compared to Caesar. One need not strain credulity to see in the juxtaposition of the words "Caesar" and "rebellion" an image of Essex as Caesar, waiting for the right moment (or for an invitation) to cross the Rubicon of the Irish Sea and take command of his nation. Whether Essex would take the crown or, like Caesar, coyly refuse it, is not clear from this image. Neither was this matter clearly decided by the actual plotters of the Essex rebellion.[29]

Also interesting is the fact that the word "city" in the line "how many would the peaceful city quit" is, in the First Folio,

spelled "Citie" with a capital "C". By shifting to the lower case, modern editors may be missing the point that the word refers not to London as a whole but to a specific area. As *Fodor's Great Britain* notes, "The City, spelled with a capital "C" refers to just the square mile beside the tower, where London originated, while greater London as a whole is the city, without a capital letter."[30] It was the City with a capital "C" which constituted the Earl of Essex's power base and to which he and his followers first moved on the day of the rebellion instead of marching directly on the court, a decision which sealed their fate.[31]

The speech containing the reference to Essex and, indeed, the entire character of the Chorus, was cut from the quarto edition of *Henry V* published in 1608. Perhaps the censors and/or publishers of the 1608 quarto recognized the politically charged and, to our minds, Brechtian nature of the character of the Chorus and decided that including him in an edition published just seven years after the Essex rebellion would be unwise.

The reference to Essex that appears at the beginning of Act Five of *Henry V* is one of the most overt to contemporary politics of any reference in all of Shakespeare's plays. Unfortunately, this reference to Essex is inevitably cut from modern productions. Whether the reference to Essex remains in a company's performance text or not, I believe that it provides a powerful indication that *Henry V*, along with the rest of the second tetralogy, should be played, not ironically as a sarcastic comment on the ways of kings, but literally as a parable of ideal kingship in the Machiavellian mode. The political vision of the second tetralogy that I have outlined in these pages differs from the once traditional orthodoxy of Tillyard, in that the ideal rulers presented are not hereditary monarchs but rather a father and son team of Machiavellian usurpers (the Bolingbrokes as Borgias). Henry IV and V rule as Machiavelli said his Prince should and as Essex' followers hoped the Earl would, not because they were born to political power, but because they understand the nature and practical requirements of that power.

Notes

1. E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

2. Edward Meyer, *Machiavelli and the Elizabethan Drama* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1936), 9.

3. Curtis Brown Watson, *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 303.

4. E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chato and Windus, 1964), 23.

5. Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 52.

6. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 261.

7. Rolf Soellner, *Shakespeare's Patterns of Self-knowledge* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 41.

8. Barbara Riebling, "Virtue's Sacrifice: A Machiavellian Reading of Macbeth." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* (Spring 1991), 272-285, esp. 274.

9. Anne Barton, "Livy, Machiavelli and Shakespeare's Coriolanus." *Shakespeare Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 122.

10. G.P.V. Akrigg, *Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 221.

11. Robert Lacey, *Robert, Earl of Essex* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 110.

12. Lacey, 5.

13. Lytton Strachey, *Elizabeth and Essex* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1928), 2.

14. Lacey, 13.

15. Strachey, 59.

16. Meyer, 100.

17. Strachey, 121.

18. Thomas H. Jameson, *The Hidden Shakespeare* (New York: Minerva Press, 1967), 34.

19. Jameson, 34.

20. Jameson, 39.

21. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. I. Evans, Gwynne Blakemore (Boston: Houghton Mufflin, 1974).

22. Jameson, 22.

23. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa, *The Portable Machiavelli* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 148.

24. Jameson, 47.

25. Shakespeare Repertory; January 23-March 15, 1998; Ruth Page Theater, 1019 N. Dearborn Street, Chicago, Illinois; Directed by Barbara Gaines.

26. Strachey, 197.

27. Lacey, 56.

28. Dollimore, 3.

29. Strachey, 125.

30. *Fodor's Great Britain*, ed. Alice Hoffman (New York: Fodor's Travel Publications, Inc., 1991), 57.

31. Strachey, 240.