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SHAKESPEARE'S AUGUSTINIAN MACHIAVELLIANISM: THE POLITICS OF *MACBETH* AND *HENRY V*

by

FERNANDO MARTINEZ-PERISSET¹

Introduction

Within the evident heterogeneity that characterises Shakespeare studies, there has been a persistent and underlying tendency to understand Shakespearean drama removed from the influence of Christian thought. Brian Cummings confidently affirms that “for almost all of the twentieth century” Shakespeare has been “idolised as a secular author, so that attempts to place him within a religious framework were marginalized and often seen as maverick or bizarre” (14). The traditional association between Shakespeare and secularism can be traced back to the seminal work of A. C. Bradley, who wrote that “Elizabethan drama was almost wholly secular; and while Shakespeare was writing he practically confined his view to the world of non-theological observation and thought” (25). Along similar lines, David Gwilym James contended that “Renaissance drama was, by and large, created and sustained by men whose imaginations [...] were free of any religious prepossessions” (91). In his peculiar Romantic vein, Harold Bloom sees Shakespeare cut off from history and ideology: “Shakespeare’s politics, like his religion, forever will be unknown to us. I suspect he had no politics, and no religion, only a vision of the human, or the more human” (113).

Early twenty-first century scholarly approaches to Shakespeare have shown at least some resistance to this prominent trend and, in some cases, have even radically contradicted it. Despite Queen Elizabeth’s ban on the explicit representation of matters of religion and the state on stage, recent research has highlighted the most salient religious elements in Shakespeare and his historical context, with special emphasis on Shakespeare’s uses of language. More precisely, Hannibal Hamlin has explored Shakespeare’s “frequent, deliberate, and significant” allusions to the Bible on the grounds that Shakespeare’s “culture as a whole was profoundly and thoroughly biblical” (1). Similarly, Alison Shell has presented a Shakespeare “whose language is saturated in religious discourse and whose dramaturgy is highly attentive to religious precedent” (3). In a review essay, these critical developments have been broadly conceptualised as the “turn to religion in Early Modern English studies” (Jackson and Marotti 167-190), and this body of literature continues to grow. In keeping with big-picture perspectives

¹ I would like to use this space to honour the memory of literary critic Paul A. Cantor (1945-2022), even though he would have probably disagreed with this paper’s conclusions with his characteristic wit and insight. I have long admired his original writings on Shakespeare and politics for their accessibility, intellectual clarity and scholarly rigour. Although I sadly never had a chance to meet him in person, I feel fortunate to have exchanged some emails with him, and he was always kind and generous. I am sure he will be sorely missed by his students and colleagues at the University of Virginia.

as well as with the relation between literature and philosophy, Julia Reinhard Lupton sees these new interpretative lenses as fruitful opportunities to “return to theory, to concepts, concerns and modes of reading that found worlds and cross contexts, born out of specific historical situations, traumas and debates, but not reducible to them” (146). In short, the evidence suggests that the long-standing secularisation thesis is no longer universally regarded as unproblematic.

Meanwhile, critical accounts of Shakespeare's response to Italy's most notorious political theorist, Niccolò Machiavelli, have generally considered Shakespeare's direct familiarity with Machiavelli's own work. ‘The end justifies the means’, one instinctively thinks as soon as one hears the name ‘Machiavelli’. Machiavelli's customary associations with a sinister reputation of infamy, impiety and deceit were indeed popularised in the Elizabethan period by the translation of Innocent Gentillet's polemic text *Contre-Machiavel*, originally written in French. The widespread circulation of this treatise in English gave rise to the critical stance that Shakespeare's world could only access biased, simplistic and cartoonish descriptions of Machiavelli's thought. E. M. W. Tillyard claimed that “in trying to picture how the ordinary educated contemporary of Shakespeare looked on history in the gross we do not need to give much heed to Machiavelli. His day had not yet come” (30). Similarly, T. S. Eliot describes the “real Machiavelli” as “a person whom Elizabethan England was as incapable of understanding as Georgian England, or any England, is” (128).

But this account can be contested. Research by Hardin Craig and Irving Ribner suggests that relatively readable copies of Machiavelli's original works were indeed available and discussed in literary and academic circles (Scott 151). Unfortunately, the next difficulty that immediately emerges is that these findings do not allow one to unequivocally ascertain whether Shakespeare himself was acquainted with Machiavellianism, nor have they been able to decisively rule out alternative sources of inspiration. Although much ink has been spilled in trying to solve this problem, the accepted view seems to be that the results have been questionable at best or sometimes simply vague and inconclusive. This is especially true when it comes to identifying close parallels between Shakespeare and Machiavelli's *The Prince* (Cox 112). There is not enough information to determine anything for sure.

Yet, one should not abandon the enterprise altogether. It is not necessary to detect direct links in order to study the similarities and/or differences between two authors. Even assuming it were clearly possible to establish explicit points of contact between Shakespeare and Machiavelli beyond reasonable doubt, those echoes could potentially have relatively limited explanatory power: verbal reliance, borrowings or parallels do not automatically constitute unmistakable evidence of intellectual or philosophical commonalities. Rather than asking how and in what form Machiavelli may have reached Shakespeare, it is probably more productive to consider how these two authors living in different countries could have responded to a similar interdiscursive cluster of preoccupations, so as to bring them into dialogue with each other regardless of whether or not Shakespeare actually read Machiavelli. This approach does not intend to discredit the usefulness of source-study tactics, but merely to acknowledge that, given the paucity of the evidence in this specific case, the study of allusions is problematic and other forms of enquiry are arguably preferable.

With an emphasis on the intellectual synchronic affinities between Shakespeare and Machiavelli, the main thesis of this paper is that Shakespeare exhibits an ‘Augustinian Machiavellianism’, a vision of kingship in which, for better or worse, successful rule requires the inescapable costs of moral compromise. At one point in *The Prince* Machiavelli makes a distinction between two kinds of military campaigns: the conquest of territories that share the conqueror’s traditions and values, and the conquest of culturally different lands (7-16). Although I will briefly refer to several plays to support my claims, I have chosen to focus primarily on *Macbeth* and *Henry V* because together they reflect the polarities proposed by Machiavelli. The fight for Scotland is the struggle for a kingdom familiar to both Macbeth and his rivals. Conversely, in his campaign against France, Henry V undertakes the more challenging task to control a country where people do not speak his language, and so he relies on cultural assimilation and soft power as much as on physical force.

Most examinations of the connection between both figures have not frequently adopted a Christian standpoint. Hugh Grady, for instance, argues that the history plays “take for granted a secular, realpolitik understanding of political power as a force for good and evil” associated with Machiavelli (26). The present article sets out to broadly situate Shakespeare within Renaissance political thought and to present him as a political theorist in his own right. When it comes to the Shakespeare/Machiavelli problem, unearthing specific elements from their Christian ideological context can offer a way forward.

“No tyrant, but a Christian king”

Federico Trillo sees an unsurmountable abyss between Christianity and Machiavelli’s teachings. It should be granted that, initially, this position is sound. In his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli introduces a hierarchy of religions based on their usefulness in political life. He shows hostility towards Christianity when compared to classical ethics. He complains that Christianity has enfeebled human beings: “our religion has glorified humble and contemplative more than active men. It has then placed the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human; the other placed it in greatness of spirit, strength of body, and all other things capable of making men very strong” (131). Chapter XXI of *The Prince* continues this apparent attack on religion. Machiavelli celebrates rather than deplores Ferdinand of Aragon’s use of religion as a mere pretence to consolidate his power (87-91). In light of this, Trillo denies any fundamental grounds of agreement between Shakespeare and Machiavelli: “Shakespeare’s plays reflect the most typical thought of Christian humanism of Erasmist origin and [...] their rejection of Machiavelli and Machiavellianism is explicit and decisive” (358).² He alleges that Shakespeare displaces Machiavellian methods onto villainous characters who are defeated and diminished towards the end of the plays, hence casting Machiavellianism in an unfavourable light. Further, he claims that “one should not forget that the second major axis that negatively complements this political vision—the treatment and condemnation of tyranny—is also present in Shakespeare’s work” (362).

² Unless otherwise specified, translations into English are my own.

The chief problem with this argument, however, is that it does not provide a reliable outline of Machiavelli's thought. It only describes accurately what the Elizabethans would call the 'stage Machiavel' *topos*, which, outside the Shakespearean corpus, would be best exemplified by Lorenzo in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. The critique of tyranny is not an adequate distinction between Shakespeare and Machiavelli because Machiavelli himself condemns abuses of power. Chapter VIII of *The Prince* is devoted to those who obtained power by wicked means. Machiavelli discusses Agathocles, a tyrannical Syracusan leader, and does not regard his deeds as praiseworthy. Although Machiavelli concedes that Agathocles rose to power from humble origins using his cunning, he frequently resorted to gratuitous displays of violence:

Yet one cannot call it virtue to kill one's citizen, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire, but not glory [...] [H]is savage cruelty and inhumanity, together with his infinite crimes, do not permit him to be celebrated among the most excellent men (35).

Rather than being an isolated instance, the condemnation of Agathocles is a recurring theme in Machiavelli's thinking. Throughout his work he repudiates Agathocles-like characters such as Julius Caesar and Pompey, who, from his point of view, "gained fame but not glory, whereas subsequent Roman generals gained glory because they did not plunder, usurp, and tyrannize over their native land" (Kahn 564). Contrary to the popular caricature promoted partly by his detractors, Machiavelli is not an uncritical advocate of tyranny for its own sake. He is concerned with the contingencies of circumstances and necessity, which sometimes require the ruler to break preestablished moral laws, but only upon sheer compulsion. Shakespeare undoubtedly criticises the 'stage Machiavel', but so does Machiavelli.

"We are no tyrant, but a Christian king" (1.2.242), Henry V announces before his court. The Christian response to Machiavelli is more complex than what Trillo seems to have in mind. There is a profound tension at the heart of Christian conceptions of war. The main theological problem was: how was it possible to reconcile the ethical dictates to turn the other cheek and live a life of meekness, charity and humility prescribed with such admirable moral clarity by the commandments—especially the fifth commandment—with the grim and horrible prospect of engaging in military campaigns? Despite the existence of pacifist answers to the question, Christian calls for political realism and variations on the notion of 'just war theory' would have been more widely adopted in Shakespeare's context (Pugliatti 9-52). Shakespeare's engagement with the just war tradition has been noted in *Henry V* (Mattox 30-53). In a more recent examination of this topic, Nathan Gilmour draws attention to the practice of confession and observes that "[a]s the king frames things, the war is not an ethical act but a mere happening in the world; whether a soldier sins during a war or not has little to do with a sin's commission as does the day of the week" (19).

The best-known formulation of this approach is found in Augustine himself. Possibly influenced by the Aristotelian notion of equity (*epieikeia*), Augustine muses that "it is the iniquity of the opposing side that imposes upon the wise man the duty of waging wars; and every man certainly ought to deplore this iniquity since, even if no necessity of war should arise from it, it is still the iniquity of men" (929). Just wars are waged in

defence of peace. Violence, when used, must be calculated. In typical scholastic fashion, Thomas Aquinas continues this tradition: “Those who wage war justly aim at peace, and so they are not opposed to peace, except to the evil peace”. Closer to Shakespeare’s time, Francisco de Vitoria, Luis de Molina and Francisco Suárez would be other exponents of the tradition. Furthermore, in *The Trumpet of War* Stephen Gosson provides a justification of war: “It may be just and necessary in two ways, the one is in defence of the innocent, the other is in revenge of injuries” (30). All these thinkers acknowledge that, although war in itself should be avoided because it is one of the worst possible evils that can afflict human beings, it should be pursued only if there are no other viable options. But why, in the first place, is it *necessary to fight for peace*?

It is sometimes thought that Machiavelli radically divorces politics from morality. But Quentin Skinner offers a corrective to this view. He explains that what sets Machiavelli apart from his contemporaries is not an intrinsic disagreement over which goals the prince should pursue, but rather a matter of the most appropriate means to pursue them: “He agrees that the proper goals for a prince to aim at are those of honour, glory and fame. But he rejects with great vehemence the prevailing belief that the surest way of attaining these ends is always to act in a conventionally virtuous way” (*Foundations* 131). In addition, Skinner clarifies that, after his first-hand experiences as a diplomat, Machiavelli concluded that the “basic weakness” different political leaders shared “was a fatal inflexibility in the face of changing circumstances” (*Machiavelli* 15). Though never explicitly defined, *virtù* is a situation-dependant notion that refers to the ability to adapt oneself to contingent states of affairs and make the most appropriate decisions that spring out of necessity. A political pragmatist, Machiavelli is mainly concerned with political efficiency. Adherence to any other commitment should be subordinated to adaptability, as otherwise the ruler risks compromising public safety by angering the citizens. “He is happy”, Machiavelli writes, “who adapts his mode of proceeding to the qualities of the times; and similarly, he is unhappy whose procedure is in disaccord with the times” (*Prince* 99). This preoccupation stems from the pessimism about the human condition he shares with the abovementioned Christian authors. John Roe remarks that Machiavelli finds verbal twists to make some of his theorisations compatible with Christian discourse. For Machiavelli, “the model prince behaves well overall, and that his occasional departure from good is just that—occasional: far from undermining the good effect, such departures indeed contribute to it”; he concludes, “*Virtù*, with its pagan emphasis on ‘strength’, is not so far removed from the Christian meaning of virtue that the two cannot remain aligned” (57).

Throughout his works, Shakespeare depicts inflexibility as a vice that usually leads to disastrous states of affairs and, ultimately, proves to be unsustainable. Steadfast Coriolanus, whose commitments to unbreakable self-sufficiency and completeness—‘to stand as if a man were author of himself’ (5.3.36)—encourage him to purge himself from any emotion that may interfere with his intention to destroy Rome, finally gives in to tears. Julius Caesar ironically claims to be ‘constant as the northern star’ (3.1.60) just before being murdered. Tarquin’s uncontrollable lust together with his inability to yield to Lucrece’s lamentations—‘O, if no harder than a stone thou art, / Melt at my tears, and be compassionate’ (594-595)—leads to a public revolt against his family and to the inception of the Republic. Richard II’s downfall is partly caused by his incapacity to

adopt fully Machiavellian attitudes and, more specifically, by his inability to change his reckless tendency to waste economic resources. He admits that his coffers “with too great a court / And liberal largess, are grown somewhat light” (1.4.44-45). He launches an unsuccessful Irish campaign and surrounds himself with flatterers. Machiavelli warns the prince against the insincerity of his advisors—he calls flattery a “plague” (*Prince* 93)—and sees prodigality as a potentially dangerous and destabilising quality: “In the end it will be necessary, if he wants to maintain a name for liberality, to burden the people extraordinarily” (*Prince* 63). In the long-run, parsimony and austerity are greater manifestation of charity than lavish expenditure. With his unrestrained prodigality and political short-sightedness, Richard fails both requirements, and suffers the consequences of his actions: “I wasted time and now doth Time waste me” (5.5.49).

The reason why Shakespeare and Machiavelli show a scepticism towards the practicality of rigidity is because they perceive the world itself in flux: human beings are endlessly variable, and instability is one of the features that presides over our condition. Machiavelli pessimistically thinks that good deeds can lead to collective harm “when that community of which you judge you have need to maintain yourself is corrupt” (*Prince* 77). Although he surely argues that the ruler must learn how and when not to be kind, Machiavelli, like the Christian thinkers before him, regrets that this should be the case. Augustine similarly concedes that “if [the wise man] remembers that he is a human being, he will be much readier to deplore the fact that he is under the necessity of waging even just wars” (929). There is a surprising selflessness in the Machiavellian prince, which stems from his commitment to the preservation of political order and stability, and from the need to avoid public revolts: “Those [evil deeds] can be called well used (if it is possible to speak well of evil) that are done at a stroke, out of necessity to secure oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can” (*Prince* 37-38).

William Bouwsma presents Augustinianism as one of the dominant discourses in Renaissance intellectual history. By understanding human nature as fallen due to original sin, Augustinianism opposed other philosophical theories that optimistically regarded the universe as rational and divine, and human society as perfectible according to destiny: “Against all this, Augustinianism, though by no means denying in principle the ultimate order of the universe, rejected its intelligibility and thus its coherence and its practical significance for man” (27). Within Augustinian thinking, human nature is historical and contingent (Gilson 192-193). For Augustine, any definition of human nature depends on what human nature has become. Our unstable historical position towards the divine is informed by the biblical account of man's corruption. The Fall produced an abrupt change in human nature that cuts us off from our original goal and state of bliss.

As usual, Shakespeare scholarship is diverse. Some commentators have simply denied the equivalence between Henry V and Machiavellian thinking altogether. Jerry Herbel, for example, believes that “Shakespeare's Henry V actually has very little in common with the quintessential Machiavellian prince” (266). By contrast, other critics have indeed detected a spark of Machiavellianism in Henry, but have denied its favourable depiction. It has been suggested that the play discloses the duplicities of this model of kingship and that we, as an audience, are meant to perceive a certain

shallowness in Henry which renders him an unsympathetic monarch. Gerald Gould argues that the play as a whole is ironic and should be understood primarily as “a satire on monarchical government” (83). Analysing the connection between ethics and authority, Stephen Greenblatt mentions that Henry “cynically” launches a military campaign “on the flimsiest of pretexts” (*Shakespeare’s Freedom* 79). Vickie Sullivan provides a systematic examination of the uses of deception and appearance, but her reading “contravenes the view that Henry V is himself that Christian king” (‘Princes’ 142).

Shakespeare departs from his sources in his characterisation of Henry V in order to stress his most Machiavellian dimension. In Holinshed, the members of the Church are responsible for the claim to France. The order to execute the prisoners of war is given “contrary to his accustomed gentleness” (81). The *Gesta Henrici Quinti* adds that, during the siege of Harfleur, Henry gave his enemies several opportunities to surrender, offering first “peace to the besieged if, freely and without coercion, they would open their gates to him” (35), and then, seeing their reluctance, launched a “mild attack” (37). But Shakespeare’s Henry is a master of the art of transferring responsibility, and this pattern can be detected in several of the play’s key scenes (Cantor ‘Henry V’ 11-32): he himself orchestrates the campaign, induces the clergy to support his plan and then presents the episode of the tennis balls as the trigger to shift the blame onto the Dauphin; he explicitly commands to kill the war prisoners; he violently threatens Harfleur; and he knows Catherine shall marry him before he even courts her. He is essentially a shape-shifter. John Alvis claims that Henry “will exercise his virtue only when to do so will most redound to his glory” (113). Appearances and circumstantial adaptability are what matter. He tells his soldiers: “In peace, there’s nothing so becomes a man, / As modest stillness, and humility: / But when the blast of war blows in our ears, / Then imitate the action of the tiger” (3.1.3-6). The prince should “not depart from good, when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity” (*Prince* 70)

To illustrate these practices at work, at one point Henry knows that the Earl of Cambridge is plotting against him but pretends to be unaware. To the surprise—and possible satisfaction—of the conspirators, Henry subsequently pardons a man who insulted him the previous day and attributes his offense to “excess of wine” (2.2.42). When their plot is exposed, the conspirators beg for the same mercy Henry has shown, but Henry grants them none: “your own reasons turn into your bosoms, / As dogs upon their masters” (2.2.82-83). Because of his juvenile years with Falstaff, Henry has projected onto others an image of himself as a rash and ill-disciplined prince, but this perception is part of a deliberate stratagem to make his enemies underestimate his abilities.

The Earl of Cambridge consequently makes the same misjudgement about Henry’s character as the Dauphin, who criticises Henry’s “wilder days, / Not measuring what use we made of them” (1.2.268-269). Henry indeed learned something valuable while frequenting Falstaff, a pedagogic lesson that his father, Henry IV, failed to learn at the time. Life at court underestimates the plebeian aspects of life that ensure Henry’s success and allow him to accommodate himself to multiple situations, which, due to the sheer contingency of the present life, differ from each other both contextually and in terms of intentions and content. Having had his own experiences with the common people, he

can immediately distinguish between a trivial comment made spontaneously by someone in a tavern from a real attempt on his life. Henry here follows Machiavelli's prescription that a ruler "needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations of things command him" (*Prince* 70).

In pointed contrast to Tillyard's denial of the relevance of Machiavelli in England, Michael Manheim interprets both sequences of history plays as the product of broader changes in Elizabethan culture. Manheim argues that Shakespeare initially exhibits a strong dislike for Machiavellianism which gradually evolves into an acceptance of the need of political realism. Manheim understands Henry V as a more favourable exponent of the same model of kingship exemplified by Richard III, but he does not emphasise any crucial moral difference between them: "What was in Richard III an image of horror and malignancy bent on power by any means possible has become an image of practical politics cast in a beautiful, heroic mould" (167). In somewhat similar terms, using the model of subversion and containment, Greenblatt claims that "the very doubts that Shakespeare raises serve not to rob the king of his charisma but to heighten it" (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 63). But R. A. Foakes has questioned this influential interpretation, fearing it may apply modern sensibilities to Shakespeare's own perspective. Foakes describes Greenblatt's argument as "an understandably jaundiced late twentieth-century reading of a play for an age that equates politics with hypocrisy and bad faith, and is anxious about the containment of subversive elements. But it is not Shakespeare's vision that Henry's rule depends on 'demonic violence'" (103).

The case of Richard III does not obviously provide evidence for the fragmentary presentation of Machiavellianism in Shakespeare, but rather evidence for its consistency. There are fundamental differences between Henry V and Richard III. Richard's murderous obsession with the pursuit of individual power aligns him with the 'stage Machiavel', but it also disqualifies him as an appropriate Machiavellian. Skinner notes that Machiavelli places the good, safety and liberty of the community above all other considerations, including not only conventional morality but also the leader's own private interests (*Machiavelli* 54-55). Henry V's understanding of the crown radically contradicts Richard's self-interestedness. In *Henry IV Part I* he acknowledges that the crown entails the duty to "pay the debt I never promised" (1.2.216). On the eve of the battle of Agincourt, he denigrates himself; he mentions that he "would not be ransomed" (4.1.187) if they lose. Moreover, he does not interpret Cambridge's foiled conspiracy personally and does not seek personal revenge. Instead he clarifies that his concern is with the public good: "we our kingdom's safety must so tender, / Whose ruin you have sought, that to her laws / We do deliver you" (2.2.175-177). He justifies his order to execute the conspirators because he sees it as a necessary evil for the preservation of political stability. Contrary to Richard III, Henry V is, like Machiavelli, interested in the common good.

The play, however, closes with the promise that despite Henry's success, prosperity will be short-lived and the kingdom will revert back to spirals of violence. Jan Kott argued that the sense of history in Shakespeare reveals the workings of a 'Grand Mechanism' in which history mercilessly repeats itself, shapes human beings and challenges their agency: "Every step upwards is marked by murder, perfidy, treachery. Every step brings the throne nearer. Another step and the crown will fall" (10). This

theory of the cyclical movement of history is compatible with the Augustinian discourse. Augustine argues that in the postlapsarian world, human society fails to provide teleological or progressive developments: “the earthly city is often divided against itself by lawsuits, wars and strife, and by victories which either bring death or are themselves short-lived” (638). Mutability is a brute fact of our condition, and perhaps the clearest example of mutability is the constant presence of war.

Peter Saccio observes that Shakespeare diverts from historical reality and intensifies the scale of the devastation insofar the tetralogies convey the idea that 15th-century England was immersed in a series of catastrophic events, whereas, in fact, peasant revolts were rare and relatively little time was spent in military campaigns (154). The reason why Henry V’s descendant, Henry VI, is a failed king who “made his England bleed” (Epilogue.12) is because of his exaggeratedly optimistic view of human existence. He fails politically because he has the wrong theological notions in mind, and so he fails to recognise the necessity of Machiavellianism. Despite his good nature, his policies come across as tragically misguided and counterproductive because he believes problems can be easily solved through transparent diplomatic efforts. As Greenblatt puts it, “he sounds more like a sententious moralist than a king. Henry does not have whatever it would take—charisma, cunning, or ruthlessness—to quell the bitterly feuding factions” (*Tyrant* 28). He mistakenly thinks too well of everyone around him and is unable to see through their layers of deceit. Henry VI confuses the disturbing reality of life in the present state with an idealised Edenic vision; he wishes to upgrade the human to a level of perfection that repeatedly eludes the human itself, at least in its current condition. His father, by contrast, carefully distinguishes between both phases, and this ontological distinction consolidates his political victories.

Even in times of peace, war must remain an ever-present possibility painfully inscribed in the minds of citizens. Machiavelli warns that monarchs should never neglect the thought of war, for those who thought more of ease than of war often lost their states (*Prince* 58-60). Michael Moriarty succinctly describes Augustinianism as “a view of human nature where weakness and subjugation by passion are the dominant features, and free will highly circumscribed” (30). There is a strong ontological pessimism in the Augustinian tradition which serves as the basis of the political stakes of just war theory. The fallen world is, by its very nature, a vale of tears, an irremediably tragic world in which justice is not always clearly served, hence the ‘need’ to ‘fight’ for ‘peace’. Contrariwise, it has been suggested that our society is nowadays becoming increasingly less violent (Pinker; Harari 1-34), but no such faith in collective improvement through exclusively human means seems dominant in Shakespeare. Shakespeare would have probably had our present-day loyalties inverted: war would have been seen as the norm rather than the exception. Paul Jorgensen remarks that “in Shakespeare’s usage peace tends to describe a political condition, a social atmosphere, more troubling and more provocative of human drama than its customary associations of concord and tranquillity” (320).

From the Augustinian perspective, the perpetual presence of violence is, regrettably, a crude fact of our existence, and, more importantly, a powerful reminder of our intrinsic weakness and a proof of our need for redemption. To adapt a celebrated line from Thomas Hobbes, life in the earthly city is nasty, brutish and short. Peter Phialas situates

Henry V in an irrevocably tragic situation, a “conflict between the impersonal necessities of the king’s public function and the multiple needs of Henry the man” (168), which explains the feelings of melancholy and waste—read by some critics as evidences of satire—that accompany some of the decisions he is forced to make, such as the rejection of Falstaff. The king is aware that the grim realities of this postlapsarian state of affairs sometimes require him to get his hands dirty, even when he may be inclined to perform certain actions unwillingly. From this angle, Machiavelli’s qualms about the usefulness of Christianity could, somewhat paradoxically, be framed in terms of an Augustinian conviction. In the city of man, in this world filled with sorrow and governed by self-love, the consequences of original sin on human history have created a reality where people actively turn on each other, men cannot be trusted, and peace is merely fleeting and momentary. As desirable as it may be in an ideal universe, peace is only a residue of the state from which we fell. It is not a durable condition in the here and now.

The question Henry confronts is not whether to have peace or wage war. Following the advice his father gives to him on his deathbed, he must choose between two kinds of war: another destructive civil war in England or a campaign against France that would unify all of England against a common enemy. He opts for the latter not as an ideal option, but as the lesser of two evils. While wooing Catherine, he extends this reasoning onto the hypothetical unification of all the kingdoms in Christendom in a possible crusade against what he would regard as another common enemy: “shall not thou and I, between Saint Dennis and Saint George, compound a boy, half French half English, that shall go to Constantinople, and take the Turk by the beard?” (5.2.207-210). The promise will not come to fruition. Henry V comes close to perfection, but he is cautious enough to know that, despite his best efforts, it would be dangerous to soar too high.

“All that may become a man”

In keeping with Patrick Gray’s proposition that one can “discern a fairly consistent” view on “the ethics of war” running through Shakespeare’s plays “akin to and perhaps informed by the positions typical of contemporary just war theory” (21), and building on my previous conclusions on the limits of human possibilities according to Augustinian thought, I turn to *Macbeth* for an account of how Shakespeare represents Machiavellian motifs in a modality of warfare that involves the reconquest of a familiar territory, even though as a play, *Macbeth* is catered to an English, rather than a Scottish audience, so there is a subterranean process of intercultural mediation involved.

Paul Cantor suggests that dictatorships often strive to recreate a form of Heaven on Earth. Macbeth aspires “to gain here in this life what Christianity promises to believers in the afterlife, a kind of absolute perfection, an infinite satisfaction” (‘Macbeth’ 329). Macbeth is continuously looking for a murder that will solve all murders, but feels disillusioned and hollow in the process. Like Richard III, when he becomes king, Macbeth learns that the throne brings him no happiness: “To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus” (3.1.47). Separated from God, man living in the earthly city attempts to live according to himself by his own means. Wanting to become a supreme, omnipotent god on Earth is a cardinal sin emblematic of a desire to pervert the divinely structured order of being. Macbeth’s ambition leads him to try to transcend the constraints of the

human. Henry V, by contrast, knows that this is never an option for him. Ontologically speaking, Macbeth wishes to overcome the limits of the possible. Macbeth's story is a progressive and degenerative descent into personal and collective chaos, into a realm of experience governed by nightmarish mental scorpions (3.2.36) that make this moral descent both inhuman and subhuman. Contradicting his original promise to Lady Macbeth, he eventually dares do more than may become a man (1.7.46). He fails and becomes less of a man for it.

George Watson, like Trillo, sees no sympathetic depiction of Machiavelli's thought on Shakespeare's part, calling the Scottish play "the widest study of Machiavellianism in English Renaissance drama and its most penetrating critique" (647). As in previous examples, the problem is not that Macbeth *is* a Machiavellian, but that he is *not* a good Machiavellian. In his unrelenting pursuit of ideal perfection, his model of selfhood seeks to become autonomous and unfettered. He wants to mould the world as he pleases, to shape it according to his own sense of self, but he does not recognise that it is his being in the world that should shape him, not vice versa. Therefore, he fails to adapt his behaviour to shifting circumstances. When presenting the dichotomy between being feared or loved, Machiavelli introduces a further distinction between being feared and being hated. Fear is a healthy disposition that commands respect and resolve. But being hated by the people can put both the king's throne and the state in jeopardy, so it defeats the purpose of *virtù*. He illustrates this point with the example of Maximinus, who rapidly lost power because he was despised due to his cruelties, so "the whole world was excited by indignation at the baseness of his blood" (*Prince* 81). Machiavelli's republicanism partly stems from his belief in the incompatibility between tyranny and prosperity insofar as tyranny leads to collective regress. Building on the view of Machiavelli as a defender of liberty, Vickie Sullivan argues that Machiavelli re-evaluates Ancient and Christian responses to politics but he is dissatisfied with both when considered separately, and he finally proposes an amalgamation of both worldviews. "Machiavelli", Sullivan writes, "appeals to certain Christian doctrines to support his vision of an earthly discipline that exercises the strength that he views as essential to sustain political life" (*Three Romes* 9). Engaging with the 'democratic turn' in Machiavelli studies, it has been recently argued that concerns with political freedom and the popular voice are central to the overall coherence of Machiavelli's oeuvre, including not only his theoretical works but also his often understudied literary production (Zuckert 41-275). The root cause of Macbeth's downfall is that he incurs public scorn and contempt. He is disconnected from the needs of his subjects. Lennox asks stability to return to "our suffering country / Under a hand accurs'd!" (3.6.48-49). Macbeth's soldiers have no direct loyalty towards him: "Those he commands move only in command, / Nothing in love" (5.2.19-20). MacDuff complains "Not in the legions / Of horrid Hell can come a devil more damn'd / In evils to top Macbeth" (4.3.54-56). Tyranny breeds collective disillusionment and the constant threat of popular uprisings, which is precisely what Machiavelli wishes to avoid. Macbeth becomes a failed Machiavellian.

Although some critics have attributed "otherworldly longings" to Christianity that keep Christian doctrine away from successful political activity (Cantor *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy* 207), there is room within Augustinian thought to suggest that an

inadequate or excessively passive engagement with the realities of the fallen world can be problematic. Daniel Derrin explains, “[f]rom an Augustinian perspective, a Christian is never justified in using the opportunity of war to exult in the pleasures of self-definition that military ‘honour’ can afford, as Shakespeare’s Hotspur, Bertram, Antony, Coriolanus (and family) do, yet must bravely engage in war when the need arises, as Shakespeare’s Paroles and Falstaff do not” (82). In *Macbeth*, Duncan’s tendency to think too well of his thanes leads him to a moral blindness similar to the one that afflicts Henry VI. Duncan, an aged king of “gentle senses” (1.6.3), acknowledges that he misjudged the character of the previous thane of Cawdor, who eventually rebelled against him: “He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust” (1.4.13-14). He will immediately replicate this mistake with the person to whom he reassigns the title of Cawdor, and the result will be his murder and the political exile of his sons. By contrast, Lady MacDuff voices a darker understanding of human life. She reformulates the Augustinian conception of fallenness in terms that eerily resemble Machiavelli’s understanding of why evil prospers and why kindness and goodness in the conventional sense can be counterproductive: “I am in this earthly world, where, to do harm / Is often laudable; to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly” (4.2.74-76). The first city of human civilisation—and with it, the origins of human society as a whole—was, according to Augustine, founded by the first fratricide. We live in the world of Cain.

If we are looking for genuine Machiavellians in *Macbeth*, Malcolm is the most likely candidate, despite being a relatively minor figure. If Macbeth resembles Richard III with his self-interested mindset, and Duncan resembles Henry VI with his unrealistic worldview, Malcolm is the Henry V of this play. Malcolm learns the lesson his father failed to learn: how not to be gullible: “modest wisdom plucks me / From over-credulous haste” (4.3.119-120). For this reason, Malcolm is prone to suspecting the potentially dubious intentions of his thanes. Harvey Mansfield argues that the Machiavellian prince “mixes some deliberate but unexpected actions of injustice with his justice” (17) so that obedience, gratitude and loyalty are ensured by reminding the subjects of the fragility of princely clemency. These considerations explain Malcolm’s attitude in his conversation with MacDuff.

Malcolm consciously crafts a three-phase strategy of dissimulation to guarantee MacDuff’s fidelity. He initially criticises MacDuff for his decision to leave his defenceless family, and tests where his loyalties lie. Whenever he feels he may have offended him, he convinces him to stay and continues his examination. Secondly, he unexpectedly portrays himself as a man of “confineless harms” (4.3.55) even worse than Macbeth, and cites a list of dreadful vices. This reaction soon prompts a selfless patriotic preoccupation on MacDuff’s part, who becomes increasingly worried with the fate of his country. But, like Henry V, Malcolm is pointedly generating a false narrative of his true self. Malcolm lies and then *un-lies* about himself. We quickly discover that, with this self-deprecation, Malcolm was giving MacDuff a chance to demonstrate the extent of his determination to defeat Macbeth and to prove himself an honourable “Child of integrity” (4.3.115). Thirdly, upon hearing of the murder of MacDuff’s family, Malcolm profits from MacDuff’s sorrow for political ends. Although his method is clearly painful—even unjust—Malcolm uses MacDuff’s suffering to redirect his hatred against his rival Macbeth. Only the promise of vengeance becomes an appropriate incentive to

serve the cause of justice: “Let’s make us med’cines of our great revenge / To cure this deadly grief” (4.3.214-215). He adds: “let grief / Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it” (4.3.228-229). The good ruler should not only show allegiance to *virtù*, but also foment *virtù*—with its implicit concerns for the common good—among his subjects, and that is what Malcolm accomplishes here.

Shakespeare and Machiavelli lived in times of socio-political upheaval. They share an interest in how to avoid the frightening prospect of civil war and how to maintain political order in a world that tends to degenerate into social chaos. Despite their occasionally harmful and fraught practices, as political leaders, Henry V and Malcolm simply cannot do any better. They embody whatever it means to be politically skilled here, as defined by man, not by God, with all of man’s inherent limitations. Although surely by no direct fault of theirs, there is no course of action that they somehow missed and which could have improved the overall outcomes. Political life is depicted as tragic and only partially ideal. There is no irony involved, no satirical exposure of the hypocritical duplicity of political practices in either *Macbeth* or *Henry V*, just an exploration of human frailty in all of its forms and a meditation on the inherent finitude, difficulties and contradictory policies that must be adopted in a postlapsarian world, a world where the only things that last forever are uncertainty, dependency, contingency and change. No grand culmination of history is available within the confines of human history.

Shakespearean wisdom for our times?

Unlike Manheim, I have argued that these plays show a favourable and roughly coherent presentation of Machiavellian policies. Shakespeare may have never read Machiavelli, but I think it is no exaggeration to suggest that Shakespeare, who devoted a lifetime to the stage, learned the value of political adaptability thanks to the theatre. Shakespeare, not incidentally, inserts a theatrical scene of role-playing in a tavern between Hal and Falstaff at the centre of *Henry IV Part 1*, the play of the making of the star of England. What characterises Henry V is precisely a capacity to put on a dramatic performance, to pretend, to enact multiple roles. Henry can reinvent himself. He is the only monarch who can disguise himself as a soldier and listen to his troops at night. Maybe Shakespeare’s distinctive contribution to political thought is the realisation that the kingly hero must become a mimetic artist: an *actor*.

Cyndia Susan Clegg identifies a similarity between the political and the religious elements in Shakespeare, but also an imbalance in the level of critical attention each issue has received separately. Political readings of the plays have provided insights into how politics appeared on stage without radically transgressing the law, but “we should not ignore the ways in which Shakespeare may have engaged contemporary religious issues simply because we think he could not do so. We should look instead for the imaginative ways in which he did” (610). One of the questions raised by the religious turn is whether some of our most seemingly secular attitudes or critical tools may be secretly more indebted to religious ideas than we may be willing to concede. I do not intend to radically equate Shakespeare with Augustine and with Machiavelli, especially since there are profound differences among them. I have tried to sketch what studying

them together might bring to critical discussions of political philosophy. What emerges is that, when the term 'Augustinianism' is—as Bouwsma uses it—applied as a conceptual label that designates pessimistic theories of human nature informed by but not exclusively restricted to the religious sphere, ontological and theological theories about the meaning of human beings and their place in the world are weaved into the mechanisms that dictate the success or failure of political rulers in civic life.

Although Shakespeare's politics may be historically removed from present-day horizons, the abrupt global events we have witnessed over the past two years—a pandemic, refugee crises, growing inequalities, ecological issues, threats to democracy, the eruption of war in Europe and the leadership of a former actor turned politician—remind us of our inherent fragility. On a deeper level, these circumstances encourage us to contemplate what we may stand to gain, both conceptually and with regards to our own political sensibilities, if we are willing to listen to voices from the past.

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Zusammenfassung

Der 'religious turn' in den Early Modern Studies hat zunehmend die weitverbreitete Annahme von einer 'säkularen Frühen Neuzeit' und der ausschließlich säkularen Ausrichtung von Shakespeares' Werk in Frage gestellt. Eine historische Kontextualisierung kann zeigen, dass vermeintlich säkulare, politische Diskurse vielfach auf religiösen Fundamenten ruhen. So lassen sich auch Gemeinsamkeiten zwischen Machiavellis und Shakespeares Werk als interdiskursive Phänomene begreifen. Mit einem Fokus auf die Kohärenz von Shakespeares Dramen argumentiert dieser Aufsatz, dass Shakespeares Könige stets dann zum Scheitern neigen, wenn sie die Notwendigkeit von Machiavellis Lehre nicht begreifen, während erfolgreiche Könige, die tragische Notwendigkeit moralischer Kompromisse im politischen Leben akzeptieren. Theorien über die menschliche Natur und insbesondere die weit verbreitete Lehre vom Sündenfall und seiner Auswirkung, wie sie von der augustinischen Tradition dargestellt wurde, stützen eine Ethik des Krieges, die unsere ebenso wie Shakespeares Gegenwart ansprechen und gleichzeitig herausfordern.