Shakespeare and Philosophy

Stanley Stewart

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Bibliographical Note

Unless otherwise indicated, all citations from Shakespeare in my text are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), and all works published before 1800 bear a London imprint. Throughout, I regularize i/j and u/v, expand contractions, and silently ignore obvious printers' errors, meaningless capitals, small capitals, italics, and the like. To avoid annoying intrusions in the text, I have also avoided the use of square brackets to indicate that the initial word in a quotation is or is not capitalized in the original. For the same reason, I avoid ellipsis marks at the end of quotations, when their elimination does nothing to alter the sense of the quotation. I am aware that Nietzsche scholars usually refer to his works by section rather than by page numbers, but because some of the sections referred to here are rather lengthy, I have, for the reader's convenience, cited page numbers. To avoid repetition, and in cases in which more than one work cited was published in the same year, I abbreviate frequently cited works. In some cases, to avoid confusion, I include the author's name; but for complete bibliographical information, see "Bibliography."

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Abbreviations

ALFA	*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*
BJJ	*The Ben Jonson Journal: Literary Contexts in the Age of Elizabeth, James, and Charles*
BT	*The Birth of Tragedy*
BWJR	*The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce*
CAP	*The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*
CV	*Culture and Value*
CWJ	*The Correspondence of William James*
DBGA	*The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*
EB	*Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.)
EH	*Ecce Homo*
EMPL	*Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*
E/O	*Either/Or*
EP	*Essays in Philosophy*
EPM	*An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*
ERE	*Essays in Radical Empiricism*
EPP	*Essays: From the Parega and Paralipomena*
EUD	*Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*
EW	*The Early Works, 1882–1898*

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FD	*Four Dissertations and Essays On Suicide and The Immortality of the Soul*
FE	*Fugitive Essays*
FT	*Fear and Trembling*
GS	*The Gay Science*
HE	*The History of England*
JP	*Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*
JSK	*The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*
LDH	*The Letters of David Hume*
LE	"A Lecture on Ethics"
LGF	*A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*
LW	*The Later Works, 1925–1953*
MW	*The Middle Works, 1898–1924*
NB	*Notebooks: 1914–1916*
NCW	*Nietzsche Contra Wagner*
NHTH	*Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*
NO	*Novum Organum*
OC	*On Certainty*
OWN	*On the Will in Nature*
P	*Pragmatism*
PA	*The Present Age*
PC	*Practice in Christianity*
PEFW	*Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will*
PI	*Philosophical Investigations*
RFGB	*Remarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough
RW	*Recollections of Wittgenstein*

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SCH	*Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*
SE	*For Self-Examination: Judge for Yourself*
SLW	*Stages on Life's Way*
SPP	*Some Problems of Philosophy*
SUD	*The Sickness Unto Death*
SWA	*Selected Writings on Aesthetics*
THN	*A Treatise of Human Nature*
TI	*Twilight of the Idols*
TLP	*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
TP	*Theoretical Philosophy: 1755–1770*
UM	*Untimely Meditations*
VRE	*The Varieties of Religious Experience*
WC	*Wittgenstein Conversations: 1949–1951*
WFB	*The Works of Francis Bacon*
WP	*The Will to Power*
WWR	*The World as Will and Representation*

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Acknowledgments

Because I have been working on this book for quite a while, I owe thanks to more than the usual number of students and colleagues, even though I may remember some of them only as faces sketched in dubiety during classroom discussions or in dismay at scholarly conferences. I like to think that even questions and comments that might have seemed to me hostile at the time have helped make material and perspectives available that, without them, would have been missed. Of course, it would be wrong to suppose that, because of their good intentions, the students and colleagues who, wittingly or unwittingly, helped bring certain materials into focus should be held accountable for any of the faults in this book. Rather, they deserve thanks—especially those who gave generously of their time to read and to criticize parts of this book as it developed. While Jeffrey Kahan and I were working on an unrelated project, he was always willing to listen to or read the various parts of the book as they took shape; and he also permitted me to test the waters of "Continental" philosophy with a part of Chapter 6 in a volume of "live essays" on *King Lear* (Routledge 2008). I thank the publisher for permission to use a version of "Lear in Kierkegaard" as part of Chapter 6, "Shakespeare and Subjectivity: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche."

Likewise, over the last few years, John Mulryan, editor of *Cithara: Essays in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, let me try out some of my ideas on Shakespeare in eighteenth-century philosophy, including early versions of chapters included here on William Richardson and David Hume. I am grateful to his publisher, St. Bonaventure University, for permission to use reworked versions of those essays in this book. Also, at every step, Richard Harp and Robert Evans, Co-Editors with me on *The Ben Jonson Journal: Literary Contexts in the Age of Elizabeth, James, and Charles*, never failed to offer support and encouragement. Under their sponsorship, I read parts of this book at several Sixteenth Century Studies Conferences; subsequently, early versions of Chapters 1 and 2 appeared in the journal, which is now published by the Edinburgh University Press. I am grateful for their friendship and advice, as well as for their permission to use revised versions of those essays in this book. I owe thanks, also, to Ralph Cohen, Editor, and to the Johns Hopkins Press, publisher, of *New Literary History*, for

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The unstinting patience and generosity of my colleagues at the University of California, Riverside, was a great help in this project. John B. Vickery never seemed to weary of my efforts to, as they now say, "access" his rich acquaintance with twentieth-century philosophy for the purposes of my interest in Shakespeare. I am embarrassed to think of the many versions of the chapter on Wittgenstein that he read and, without complaint, critiqued, as if he were unaware of predecessor texts. Then too, I probably would not even have moved in the direction of "Literature and Philosophy" were it not for Bernd Magnus and Jean-Pierre Mileur, with whom I collaborated on *Nietzsche's Case: Philosophy as/and Literature* (Routledge 1993). Working on that book shifted my focus from archival study of Renaissance literature to investigation of the diction employed by practicing critics of Renaissance literature and culture. In turn, that shift led to a book-length study entitled *Renaissance Talk: Ordinary Language and the Mystique of Critical Problems* (Duquesne 1997) and, now, to *Shakespeare and Philosophy.*

In fact, my interest in the interrelations between philosophy and literature goes back even farther than the Nietzsche project. Quite early in my academic career, I moved from an interest in linguistics, which developed in graduate school, to philosophers connected with the "ordinary language" movement. While a graduate student at UCLA, and because of remarks that Professor Ralph Cohen made regarding the relationship between philosophy and literary criticism in a seminar on eighteenth-century literature, I attended lectures given by a visiting professor named John Wisdom. He referred often to one of his instructors at Cambridge University, named Ludwig Wittgenstein. When I went to teach at the University of California, Riverside, I learned that Larry Wright conducted a Wittgenstein Reading Group. He invited me to join, and I spent twenty-five years reading Wittgenstein with the Group. Over those many years, Larry Wright remained a source of intellectual stimulation. While writing this book, I have tried to keep his remarks on "reasoning" in mind; and if I have succeeded in replacing "argument" with "reasons-giving," it is probably due to the benign influence of Larry Wright and the Wittgenstein Reading Group.

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and Renaissance literature. Steve Axelrod, Joseph Childers, Emory Elliott, and George Haggerty have never wavered in their support of my project, at every stage of its development, this even though the project has taken more time to complete than any of us thought it would. Here, I must give special thanks to the Chair of the Department of English, Katherine Kinney; with the responsibilities of a large department on her shoulders, she was never too busy to discuss "Shakespeare and Philosophy" with me, and always with a mind to link it with her own work in Modern American Literature. Likewise, more than once, our like-minded Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, Stephen Cullenberg, set aside concerns of a rapidly growing college to discuss my Shakespeare project, and to encourage my efforts as Co-Editor of *The Ben Jonson Journal.*

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1 Philosophy's Shakespeare
Defining Terms

The rise of science in the eighteenth century led David Hume, William Richardson, and others like them to ponder ways in which literature and literary criticism were, or could be, vehicles for the discovery and dissemination of knowledge. A century later, the aim was more likely to be to think of literature in musical terms. When Pater asserts that poetry aspires to "the condition of music," he implies that poetry increases in value in proportion to its appositeness to music. To put that point another way, Pater assumes that music is more valuable than poetry, and so that the prestige of poetry increases with its capacity to mimic the effects of music. Likewise, when one describes a piece of music as a "tone poem," the rhetorical aim is to appropriate value in the opposite direction, toward "programmatic" music, "Pastoral" symphonies, and "Pictures at an Exhibition." In the twentieth century, literary critics were more inclined to emulate the social scientists; presumably, their method and vocabulary were more telling, more important, than those of literary studies. In this context, it was convenient to admire literature in proportion to the way in which it reflected sympathy with one or another social cause or political movement. As partisan zeal increased, this kind of literary criticism became, in Harold Bloom's lively characterization, the academic equivalent of "cheerleading" for paladins of the "six branches of the School of Resentment: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians" (Bloom 1994, 527).

We need not enshrine Bloom's characterization to wonder whether such recent efforts as *Marxist Shakespeares* are enough like English Studies or Comparative Literature to be grouped under these disciplines, which is not to say that, if they are not, they must be consigned to categories with less prestige. We could infer that Bloom is merely saying something about the current emphasis of literary criticism on social concerns. So we might ask: Is *Marxist Shakespeares* about Marx or Shakespeare or both or neither? One answer might be descriptive. Contributors to this particular collection of essays on Shakespeare are professors of English or Comparative Literature. Then if we think the tone of "An Elegy for the Canon" in Bloom's *The Western Canon* is appropriate to the current status of literature in the curriculum, we would seem to share Bloom's regret for the triumph, as

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Antonio Gramsci might put it, of "cultural history" over "artistic criticism in the strict sense" (Gramsci 291). Of course, Gramsci is a very different kind of critic from Harold Bloom. Gramsci considered Tolstoy, the Christian, and Shaw, the secularist, as rhetorically identical in their "moral tendentiousness." Gramsci was a Marxist, but if he were writing today, I think he would join with Bloom in criticizing the movement on the left in literary criticism toward an apologetics of moral indignation. He would say that, in their determination to emulate the social scientists, socially motivated literary critics have, perhaps unwittingly, abandoned "artistic criticism in the strict sense". Why, for instance, do we have *Marxist* rather than, say, *Nietzschean* or *Pragmatic Shakespeares*? Do "New Historicism" and "Cultural Materialism" dominate Shakespeare criticism so completely that the field has become the intellectual equivalent of applause for "the last Marxists standing" on the "battleground" of "that strange creature 'Shakespeare' in our cultural politics" (Howard and Shershow 2001, xii)?

Gramsci would not be alone in such an estimate. Historians of ideas might also be amused by the whiff of Whiggish self-satisfaction in the martial figure here (of literary criticism as a "battleground"). At the same time, they might concede that Victorian critics thought they were praising poetry when, in an age that idolized Wagner, they described poetry as "musical." In *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom eulogizes literary values because, for him, they seem to be, for all practical purposes, dead. "Cheerleading" has replaced literary appreciation. In this sense, Terence Hawkes sees *Marxist Shakespeares* as an effort "to undermine ancient and inherited prejudices, such as the supposed distinction between 'foreground' and 'background'" (Howard 2001, xi), as one of many signs of the progress of "Cultural Materialism." A glance at the core curriculum of almost any college literature department will show that this effort to replace historical analysis with social advocacy has succeeded.

Obviously, the "Cultural Materialists" consider this success benign, and it may well be so. But if in fact it is benign, it is so because literary values held by critics like Harold Bloom either were, so to speak, "unsound" or "pernicious" or in some way "unproductive"—not benign; or, if the values of these critics were not themselves pernicious, then at the very least they were predicated on perceptions which were "improper" or "biased" or "oppressive" or something of the sort. The point is that, for them, literary history *qua* literary history, accompanied by attempts at objective critical analysis, did not and does not encourage the "right" social outcome. Somewhere here, where literary discussion intersects with philosophy, the temptation to Whiggish self-dramatization can be, I think, both powerful and hidden. When moral judgment marches hand in hand with historical characterization, well-meaning critics may veer toward the cultural attitude of Sir John Frazer, whose analysis of "primitive" religious practices Wittgenstein severely scrutinized. Specifically, Wittgenstein found fault with Frazer for his belief, typical with Victorian anthropologists,

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that evolution was a process of inevitably forward progress from savagery toward late-nineteenth-century English institutions and customs. Hence, Sir John Frazer's *The Golden Bough* reflected the views of enlightened Victorian society: "Frazer's account of the magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as *mistakes*" (*R*FGB 1). Frazer wrote as if there were something wrong with the practices of the people that he was studying, as if their rites and ceremonies contradicted, and so blasphemed, the one true God of Victorian England, namely, "science." In fact, Wittgenstein suggests, since the rain dance as well as the prayers of men like St. Augustine and "the Buddhist holy-man" assert no hypotheses, it is impossible for them to contradict any hypothesis. With something like the same stricture in mind, and at the risk of appearing to be one who would hoist the banner of cultural "bias"—even that of the worst "ancient," "inherited" kind—the following discussion will proceed on the assumption that the "distinction between 'foreground' and 'background'" might help explain the history of Shakespeare as a subject *of* philosophy, as distinct from philosophy as a subject *in* Shakespeare studies.

Let me say at the outset that there are many legitimate aims of literary criticism and among them might be "liberating" readers from attitudes that well-meaning critics, whether rightly or wrongly, find pernicious. So when critics suggest that universities should replace Shakespeare in their curricula with authors more tractable to such political interests as Marxist feminism (Howard and O'Connor 1987, 1), we should probably impute a sincere, even charitable, motive to these critics. In the case in question, the argument is, if I understand correctly, that if literary critics can politicize the subject of Shakespeare, they can politicize, and in that way do as they wish, with any author. This statement about the power involved in establishing curricula reflects a view which goes back at least to Plato, and, in one way or another, probably most societies support some version of it. School boards and other "Guardians" spend a great deal of time and money making sure that younger members of society read certain books rather than others. But having said that, I am still inclined to ask: Why, in today's university of all places, would anyone want to replace Shakespeare with an author more malleable to one or another political program? For that matter, why would anyone want to do anything "to" Shakespeare, or "to" his or any other author's works? Returning to *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, I want to say that Wittgenstein was not arguing that religious practices of other societies were improper subjects of scientific inquiry. Rather, he was saying that, as a scholar of the subject, Frazer failed to meet his obligation to get the facts straight about the subject under consideration.

For Wittgenstein (to whom we will return in Chapter 8), description of a culture is an ethical matter, or, at least, it has an ethical component. When we characterize a cultural custom or artifact, we purport to understand it. For centuries, for instance, scholars and critics have tried to explain Shakespeare and his works. They have researched his life, his times, and

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his writings, and argued strenuously about the proper means of studying them. We can safely say, I think, that most of these critics share the honorable aim, as the subtitle of Colin McGinn's *Shakespeare's Philosophy* puts it, of *Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*. They want not only to understand this great poet, but also to share that understanding. And yet somehow the significance of Shakespeare's hallowed texts remains "undiscovered," as if just out of reach of our reading or viewing, just "behind" the words and actions that we perceive or imagine as the work unfolds. Since McGinn is a professor of philosophy, it is not surprising that he approaches "Shakespeare from a specifically philosophical perspective" (McGinn viii). In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to the question of the restraints, if any, that historical context imposes on authors like Shakespeare, and, for that matter, on their critics. The Marxists are not alone in this concern. For many critics, the question is: Who or what wrote Shakespeare's plays? Was Shakespeare—the actor, playwright, and businessman—the agent or primary cause of the works attributed to him, or was he more like the warm wax upon which the seal of Elizabethan and Jacobean culture was pressed? Is it possible for an unusually gifted poet to "transcend" the commonplaces of his time, to address ideas and attitudes that neither he nor his audiences would have recognized? If so, we might legitimately claim that Shakespeare, besides being a talented playwright, was also an original thinker. We can probably trace the serious effort to characterize Shakespeare as a philosopher to Leo Strauss and his followers, Allan Bloom in particular. In *Shakespeare On Love and Friendship,* Bloom declares that "Shakespeare was the first philosopher of history" (Bloom 1993, 29). No less straightforwardly, Agnes Heller and Leon Craig argue that Shakespeare was a creative, philosophical mind. For Craig, Shakespeare was "as great a philosopher as he is a poet" (Craig 4). Indeed, "Shakespeare ranks high among true philosophers" (12), and, similarly, Heller writes that, along with Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Bacon, Shakespeare "opened the way for . . . realistic ethics" (Heller 18).

Few scholars of the Early Modern period deny the importance of philosophy in the work of major authors such as Marlowe and Shakespeare. We have good reason to suppose that the authors of *The Jew of Malta* and *Richard III* knew Machiavelli well; "Machiavelli" delivers the Prologue in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, and Shakespeare's Gloucester, who would "get a crown" at any cost, claims that he can "set the murtherous Machevil to school" (*3H6* 3.2.193). As for the reaction of their audiences, as it is with discussion of Freud in the twentieth century, in the Age of Elizabeth, even people who had never read Machiavelli were familiar with ideas attributed to him. And the same could be said of other thinkers. Many dozens of scholars have shown the impress of ancient and modern philosophy on the curricula of Renaissance schools and universities. Richard Popkin has demonstrated the influence of Savonarola and Montaigne, Lily Bess Campbell of Aristotle, Robin Headlam Wells of Cicero, and so on. In a general sense,

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we could say that the works of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Milton exhibit a wide spectrum of reading in philosophy. But this fact does not make any one of these distinguished poets "philosophers" in the sense implied by McGinn, namely, the "specifically philosophical" sense. "Philosophy" is not a normative term. A poet's work may embody significant philosophical substance without being an original philosophical statement. My aim here is not to refute such learned critics as Allan Bloom, Agnes Heller, and Leon Craig, but to investigate the ways in which these critics advance the case for the proposition that Shakespeare was a "philosopher" from, as McGinn puts it, "a specifically philosophical perspective."

Consider, first, Leon Harold Craig's argument in *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's* Macbeth *and* King Lear. Here, Craig purports to represent "old fashioned views about literature" (Craig 11), while at the same time showing that Shakespeare's plays embody "philosophical merit" (7). To accomplish this task, Craig must first get around what he regards as the prevailing trend in criticism toward philosophical relativism. For how can there be philosophical merit without wisdom, and how can there be wisdom without knowledge? And yet nowadays—especially in the humanities and social sciences—the trendy assumption that knowledge is nothing more than the assertion of raw political power has gained considerable political momentum, so much so that, in many disciplines, it goes almost without challenge. So at least in some circles, since Shakespeare knew nothing, he had no knowledge to impart. For many of the same reasons, it is improper to say that Shakespeare's works reflect "reality," because we have no stable, "unmediated" sense of what "reality" might be, even in our own time, much less in Elizabethan days.

But, setting these worries aside for the moment, Craig says that Shakespeare was the greatest of all contributors to the English language, and that he was so not just because of his facility with the language, which nevertheless inspired over two hundred operas (Craig 3). More to the point of his philosophical argument, Craig insists that Shakespeare's great success reflects his understanding, his wisdom: Shakespeare was "as great a philosopher as he is a poet" (4). Indeed, "Shakespeare ranks high among true philosophers" (12). Literary criticism must not only ask, but answer, such questions as King Lear wanted Edgar, the "Theban" and "philosopher," to address. Here, Craig admits that he is using philosophy in a normative sense, that he in fact presupposes certain value distinctions. But he prepares the way for his investigation by admitting his bias toward traditional literary and philosophical inquiry. For him, philosophy is not a statement of a particular point of view, but an activity aimed at understanding, or rather "a way of life in which this activity is the dominant organizing principle" (12). But then, since, as the subtitle of his book indicates, Craig is primarily interested in *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, it is safe to say that by philosophy he means "political philosophy." Then, given this narrowing of the topic toward practical concerns of governmental consequences, not surprisingly,

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Shakespeare is a psychologist, par excellence. Thus, his philosophy derives from the concrete experience of *aporia*. At this juncture, Craig distinguishes between "intellectual" and "experiential" knowledge; true understanding involves both. Angelo is Shakespeare's representation of the one without the other. It follows for Craig that *Macbeth* and *King Lear* show "what can be gained from reading Shakespeare 'philosophically'" (21). Analyzing these two plays, Craig demonstrates that Shakespeare knew, appreciated, and used the political wisdom of Plato and Machiavelli (251).

Given this philosophical perspective, it might seem strange that Craig looks to *Macbeth*, which has far less philosophical discourse than, say, *Measure for Measure, Timon of Athens*, or *Hamlet*. Even *Coriolanus* is more preoccupied with political theory. *Macbeth* is a play marked by horrendous violence, and yet for Craig it is Shakespeare's "most metaphysically ambitious" work (Craig 26). In this context, it is important to remember that there are serious grounds on which Macbeth might rightly claim the throne. The numerous mysteries in the play suggest, Craig argues, that *Macbeth* "is designed to illustrate the political teachings we associate most readily with Machiavelli's *The Prince*" (31). For, although Duncan is the recognized king of Scotland, beloved rather than feared by all, he is also weak, depending as he does on others, especially Macbeth, to lead his armies in battle. In the same way, Macbeth depends on Lady Macbeth for political advice, and it is she—no Machiavelli—who thinks that no one will ask about the chamberlains' motive for killing Duncan. Craig reminds us that the word "metaphysical" occurs only once in the Shakespeare canon, namely, when Lady Macbeth ponders the letter from her husband on his meeting with the Weyward Sisters. She wants to intervene to help the situation with which "fate and metaphysical aid doth seem / To have . . . crown'd" her husband." For Craig, the diction here touches questions of reality, spirit, morality, time, and necessity. Hence, the play's notable appositions between foul and fair, light and dark, good and evil, truth and lie. No Shakespeare play more forcefully confronts metaphysical concerns than *Macbeth*, and none more persistently probes philosophical questions of good and evil, freedom of the will, the nature of the world, and man's responsibility to others. In the latter connection, it is also the author's most unrelenting exploration of Machiavellian principles. It seems clear thus far that, for Craig, Shakespeare is a political philosopher in the sense that he had read and understood Machiavelli.

Now if *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most philosophical play, *King Lear* is his most misunderstood. Craig disagrees with Coleridge, who thought the first scene was not integral to the play. On the contrary, not only is it integral, but it is crucial, for, remember, Machiavelli insisted that it was harder and more important to sustain than to establish a state. So the division of the kingdom is, at bottom, wrongheaded. The King of France recognizes this, which is why he steps in so quickly to supplant Burgundy. The love test raises the same question that Edmund asks in the following scene: What

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does nature ask of parents and offspring? Lear and Gloucester claim to love their children equally, but one bestows "land" on his older "legitimate" rather than his younger "natural" son, and the other wants to give a "more opulent" third of the island to the youngest of his three daughters. When Edmund asks why age and custom, rather than merit, determines inheritance, damning him as "base," he forces the audience to rethink the political reality of family structure and of the commonwealth as well. Legitimate, illegitimate, first, last—in politics, life is unfair. Insofar as the play searches into an understanding of "Nature" (Craig 168), *Lear* is, writes Craig, a play about the "birth of philosophy." Thus, the play examines the difference between the "*natural*" and the "*man-made*," which Shakespeare traces out in the "intellectual transformation" of the protagonist. Lear discovers that if, indeed, the world is "something" as distinct from "nothing," then the world must make sense. And yet in his accustomed reason, he cannot make sense of it. Paradoxically, in his descent into madness—in his surrender of his rational" attachment to his family and the world—Lear survives with a new moral bearing, which emerges from an imaginary trial of his daughter-malefactors, and transcends the seemingly cosmic range of his indignation:

> I will have such revenges on you both
> That all the world shall—I will do such things—
> What they are yet I know not, but they shall be
> The terrors of the earth! (3.4.279–83)

In Act 4, Lear erroneously thinks that Edmund is kinder to his father than the son "got 'tween the lawful sheets" (4.6.116). But his newfound moral order transcends any relaxation of sanction against adultery. To "let copulation thrive" is to govern only by half measures. Since the power of judgment is the source of Lear's suffering, judgment itself must be brought to the bar, judged, and executed: "None does offend, none, I say none" (168).

Craig is interested, then, in the way in which Shakespeare understands the law; and the law connects the dramatist to philosophy. For instance, in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare examines Plato's view that any society with excessive license produces tyranny. Here, it is almost as if Barnardine and Claudio are examples from Plato's *Republic*; one flouts the law, while the other, a felon convicted of a capital crime, lives a more or less normal life in prison, immune to worry. The questions are how and why Vienna has sunk to such a low condition, and why Duke Vincentio places Angelo, rather than Escalus, in power. Craig finds the answer to these questions in Machiavelli's analysis of Cesare Borgia's pacification of Romagna (Craig 237). The difference is that, to pacify an angry citizenry, Borgia executed the equivalent of Angelo in his reform program. Although Claudio and Mistress Overdone flout the same law, Craig perceives a serious difference between the attitudes of the two offenders. These and similar

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Platonic considerations suggest to Craig that Shakespeare's play develops a distinctly Stoic point of view. In that context, the Duke's astonishing proposal of marriage to Isabella is not at all out of place, for "he is by nature a philosopher" (242), which explains the sad state of Vienna at the time of Angelo's commission. At the start a confirmed bachelor, like the King of Navarre in *Love's Labor's Lost*, Angelo is "as good as married by the end" (243). (Craig's Isabella will set aside her plan for a cloistered life and accept Vincentio's romantic proposal.) For Shakespeare, the problem in political philosophy is how to find the middle ground between abstinence (the convent) and licentiousness (Vienna). The Duke learns that private virtue is not the answer. His proposal is an act of self-sacrifice. For Vienna's sake, he must enforce the protocols of marriage, even at the cost of his study and of Isabella's fidelity.

Craig argues, then, for Shakespeare's robust interest in political philosophy, especially as the subject was understood at the time in the writings of Plato and Machiavelli. He is by no means alone in this view. For instance, like Craig, Agnes Heller traces the hard edge of Machiavelli's thought in Shakespeare's work, but she extends the argument for Machiavelli's strong influence to the second Henriad, the Roman plays, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*. Allowing that it may seem strange to call Shakespeare a philosopher, who, except for the one speech by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, has little to say about the cosmos, Heller construes Shakespeare's skepticism in accord with Machiavelli's. As such, Heller writes, it is more historical than cosmic: "One can only agree with E. M. W. Tillyard's observation in *Political Shakespeare* that Shakespeare hardly mentions the cosmic order." Accordingly, Shakespeare sees the world in "contingent" or "contextual" terms. Thus, in Shakespeare's tragedies, "*heimarmene*, the blind and irrational fate, rules" (Heller 1). From this point of view, Heller meets the question of Shakespeare's status as a philosopher head-on, admitting that the "dubious honorary title of philosopher" need not be accorded him, just because some of his characters engage in philosophical musings. Rather, in Shakespeare, actions do the work of precepts. So, with Craig, Heller turns to Shakespeare's treatment of the character of Macbeth, which, as Heller points out, seems to lend credence to Hannah Arendt's "idea that evil comes from thoughtlessness" (5). With regard to the term "philosopher," it is important to remember that Shakespeare employs it to characterize Edgar and Apemantus as "mad." So Heller insists that Shakespeare has no philosophical agenda, but again, like Machiavelli, he is "infinitely interested in struggle between a human being and fate" (4). In this way, he is more attuned to the perceptions that postmoderns have of Machiavelli than to those of his own time. Again, Heller echoes the theme of "negative capability": Shakespeare makes no absolute judgment of the moral qualities of the likes of Richard II, Bolingbroke, Henry IV, or Richard III. Instead, he examines the effective and ineffective uses of cruelty, when it is employed by the powerful for good or ill political purposes. In this context, although Coriolanus may be an unsympathetic character, he is

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not wicked. Goneril and Regan are wicked, "as they are presented in their relationships to others," especially to Cordelia and Lear (370).

It is a telling point for Heller that Shakespeare's plays lack "divine intervention." In Shakespeare, "contingency rules": "There is no meaning here, only misery." This being so, Heller can brush aside Henry VI's recognition "in the young Richmond the future redeemer of England" (Heller 15). Like Machiavelli, Shakespeare sees no purpose in history. He is too skeptical to "entertain such an illusion" (17). On the other hand, because she recognizes development in Shakespeare's attitude toward the plebes, Heller sees the Roman plays, from *Coriolanus* to *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*—as she does the second Henriad—in historical sequence, rather than in chronological order of composition. With this progress in mind, she lays out a program of Shakespeare's dramatic "secularization of the paradox of divine justice" (19). Within this framework she links Shakespeare to Machiavelli, this despite the fact that the latter looks for mechanisms that produce regularity, while Shakespeare is more interested in the uniqueness of personal choices, even if those choices militate against social order. In this way, Shakespeare fits what some critics call the "counter-Renaissance."[1] With Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Bacon, Shakespeare "opened the way for . . . realistic ethics" (18).

To advance her thesis, Heller unpacks the locution, "the time is out of joint," which she sees as the major motif of Shakespeare's history plays. Nature and nurture, legitimate and illegitimate, power and will—these hurl themselves at each other with often equivalent claims to social rectitude. (As we shall see in Chapters 5 and 6, this line of argument is reminiscent of Hegel.) The Wars of the Roses is just the vehicle to trace out the consequences of the nature–inheritance opposition, and the strength of the conflict carries over in *Hamlet* and *Lear*. In a flourish, following Harold Bloom, Heller asserts that "we are Shakespearean heroes and heroines; Shakespeare reinvents us as well" (Heller 9). She quotes from Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*: "They [Shakespeare's plays] read us definitively" (9). Shakespeare's readership, then, is not so much an active participant in an imaginative art as it is a creation shaped by a powerful creator. This nonjudgmental shaping power avoids moral judgment. This fact explains why Shakespeare's transparently moral characters, Horatio and Brutus, for instance, "have no monologues" (10). (Presumably, Brutus's "serpent's egg" speech—when he delivers it prior to the conspirators' arrival, he is alone onstage—doesn't count. And yet it is the means by which Shakespeare lets the audience know why, late at night, Brutus admits the conspirators to his dwelling.)

Heller is aware that the casuistry implicit in her thesis makes it hard to avoid certain philosophical anomalies. For instance, can we, in accord with the skeptical tradition, say truly that Shakespeare's plays affirm such and such a political proposition? And even if we can, given her postmodern thesis, which seems to deny the validity of moral standards (and depends on

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a rather thoroughgoing view of Shakespeare's "negative capability"), how can Heller simultaneously impute to Shakespeare an admirable "negative capability," while registering her own moral indignation? Admittedly, in her "Postcript: Historical Truth and Poetic Truth," Heller tries to answer such questions by denying that answers to such questions are needed or even possible: "The presentation of Shakespeare's poetic truth about history speaks for itself; it does not require, or even allow for, a conclusion" (Heller 367). Is the point, then, that this non-conclusion is the only "conclusion" we can draw concerning Shakespeare's political philosophy? Not exactly. Heller wants to clarify the locution "poetic truth about history" by distinguishing factual from poetic truth. The past is always changing, because "new facts" are discovered, and new theories are generated into which these facts are arranged in explanatory form. These arrangements are only fictions, because they are "approximations," which means that they are something like estimates, and so, of necessity, not accurate. This is so because "one will never know how something really happened, first and foremost because nothing 'really' happened in any one fixed way" (367). But can something be said to approximate this "nothing [that] 'really' happened" in *n* un-fixed ways?

I realize that my question is awkwardly worded, but what Heller has to say about Shakespeare as a political philosopher involves telling what "is *revelatory*" about the past in Shakespeare's plays; and here the criterion of revelation "is the truth that we *accept as it is*" (Heller 367). We do not ask of Shakespeare's Richard II, as we might of a historian's Richard II, whether he really did such and such. Heller writes: "In the hylomorphic tradition (for example, in Hegel), one could say that the content disappears entirely in the form" (368). We know there are *n* variations of *Hamlet*, as performances, either by design or by accident, include or exclude entire speeches or scenes or parts of them. For Heller, these variations do not touch what remains constant and revelatory. Here, assuming that "the whole drama is staged and the end remains unchanged" (369), "there is nothing to approximate, because the drama itself *is* the truth" (369), which truth is not referential, but self-referential. The historical Richard III may have been born with teeth, but we cannot affirm the truth of the proposition that he was born with teeth on the grounds of Gloucester's confession and the Duchess of York's complaint in the first Henriad. For Heller, the "revelatory truth" (370) of Shakespeare's tragedies is like the truth of seder for Jews or of Christmas for Christians. Knowing that we cannot confirm these truths in the same way as we do historical facts does not in the least lessen their importance.

I look closely at Craig and Heller, not because they have broken new ground in arguing for Shakespeare's serious interest in and use of Plato and Machiavelli, but because, although they focus on different works, they do make refutation look unpromising, and maybe even pointless. Even so, we might still ask: Does employment of the wisdom of Plato and Machiavelli

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make Shakespeare a "philosopher," that is, a "philosopher" in the sense of Colin McGinn's locution, that is, one with "a specifically philosophical perspective"? To my knowledge, no critic has addressed this question more forcefully in the affirmative than A. D. Nuttall. In *Shakespeare the Thinker*, A. D. Nuttall advances the argument of critics like Bloom, Heller, and Craig, claiming that Shakespeare was not just an intelligent reader of Machiavelli, but a philosopher in his own right. This is so because Shakespeare addresses epistemological and ethical questions in ways that are not at all like those he learned in his Stratford grammar school. If I understand correctly, Nuttall answers the question, "Does Renaissance philosophy circumscribe the possibilities of 'the meaning behind Shakespeare's plays?'" with an emphatic "No." And in the process of that argument, he registers a most strenuous objection to the "social constructionist" shibboleth popular among academics adhering to postmodern doctrine, which holds that philosophical notions represented in Shakespeare's plays reflect the interests and anxieties particular to Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

Nuttall's thoughtful study examines "almost all the plays" of Shakespeare except *King John, The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Edward III,* and *Two Noble Kinsman*, the latter two of which (and presumably *Edmund Ironside*, which he does not mention) he dismisses as "of doubtful attribution" (Nuttall ix). The point is that, for reasons having nothing to do with attribution, Nuttall finds *Titus Andronicus* and *Pericles* worthy of comment, and in the latter case, even of serious interest. This is not surprising, though, since Nuttall makes it clear from the outset that, for him, the subject of Shakespeare is personal. So he begins his book in the autobiographical mode, recalling that he attended a Shakespeare conference in Stratford. The dreariness of the proceedings drove him into the streets, where he pondered what it must have been like to be Shakespeare, by modern standards short of stature, and (this had never occurred to me) wandering these very lanes without access to toothpaste. Nuttall recalls that Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, which reminds him that Bill Clinton looked very different in photographs taken thirty years apart. The same is probably true of Shakespeare's house; time must have taken quite a toll. Still, Nuttall felt closer to Shakespeare on the street where the poet lived than he did "in the airless lecture-room [he] had left" (4).

I dwell on this narrative because Nuttall's philosophical approach is often personal, even intimate, in detail. For instance, he tells of attending a performance of *Cymbeline* with a friend, whom "he had always thought of as coldly detached" (Nuttall 343). When in Act 5 Posthumus strikes Imogen, the audience is shocked, even though it knows that Imogen is disguised as a man, and that Posthumus does not recognize her. But when Vanessa Redgrave as Imogen responds ("Why did you throw your wedded lady from you? / Think that you are upon a rock, and now / Throw me again"), his friend's face, "wet with tears," indicated that the shock had quickly passed, making way for a very different emotion. Without imputing an extension

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of that personal slant on the material, Nuttall moves to the next work in his proposed chronology, *The Winter's Tale.* Anyone who has read Freud, he says (it matters that Nuttall has read Freud with as much conviction as care), will recognize that Leontes is jealous of Polixenes because of their homosexual liaison "years before" (346). The reason no one saw this until J. I. M. Stewart wrote about it in 1949 is "probably because Jacobean English ['the imposition clear'd, / Hereditary ours'] has become difficult to follow." As Nuttall sees it, at the beginning, Leontes' feelings for Polixenes are only "partly homosexual," but moments later, this partial affection emerges as an imagined "sexual liaison" between Polixenes and Hermione. Nuttall buttresses his argument by the normally sensible suggestion that readers of Shakespeare should "always listen to the lady" (347). Hermione does tweak Polixenes with questions about what he and Leontes did to and with each other in those early, "innocent" years.

This easy movement from textual analysis to personal reminiscence is not only typical of Nuttall's relaxed style, but it is also integral to his thesis, which entails an individual corollary. Nuttall's Shakespeare is always, like the critic, an individual, never simply a cultural product. Moreover—and this is important to the argument of whether Shakespeare is a philosopher—Shakespeare is almost always thinking. I say "almost" because there are exceptions. Nuttall admits that not all of Shakespeare's plays exhibit serious, philosophical thought. For instance, *Pericles* seems not to encourage the idea of a playwright thinking (Nuttall 333); and in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare does not seem to be thinking very hard (226). But these and a few other exceptions do not diminish Nuttall's insistence that the artifacts that Shakespeare produced come from a very particular being, a gifted playwright who focused on experience philosophically. For example, in 1579, a young woman drowned in the Avon near Stratford, perhaps a suicide, which possibility makes Nuttall think of Ophelia, especially when he remembers that the unfortunate young lady's name was Katherine Hamlett (4). This and many other deaths, including the death of a man with the same name as Shakespeare's father, had "the effect of a tolling bell presaging things to come, the death of Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, in 1596, and then the play itself, written around 1600, when the other John Shakespeare, the poet's father, was nearing his end (he died in 1601)" (4). This "train of thoughts," as Hobbes characterized the phenomenon, takes its rise from associations in Shakespeare's mind. Since the movement of thoughts is forward in time, as Shakespeare writes one play, he is already thinking about the next. It seems to me that Nuttall's critical method works in much the same way; he tells us that he first heard of Katherine Hamlett in a footnote in E. A. Armstrong's *Shakespeare's Imagination.* Armstrong was, Nuttall recalls, "a curious figure in the history of Shakespeare criticism" (5), who put him onto the notion that ideas and figures in Shakespeare are "recycled" in such a way that the story of Katherine Hamlett reappears as the narrative of Ophelia's "doubtful death" in Act

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4 of *Hamlet* (8). Thus, "the end of his thought remembers its beginning," even as Shakespeare "thematized [*his*—that is, *Nuttall's*] thoughts" (8). In this way, Shakespeare's experience works its way into his plays in the same way that it works its way into the critic's "thoughts."

Nuttall's emphasis on shared features of experience may explain his apology for the length of *Shakespeare the Thinker*, which gathers together an ever more complex aggregate of memories. Accordingly, just as in the first Henriad, with the pivotal figure of Richard III, Shakespeare thinks about mismatched mates (Richard and Lady Anne), so he continues to examine the same theme in *The Comedy of Errors* (Nuttall 56). Also early on, Shakespeare wants to compete with and surpass Christopher Marlowe. So, encouraged by the success of *The Comedy of Errors,* he writes *The Taming of the Shrew*, which, because it is a beautiful love story, segues neatly into *Love's Labor's Lost.* As we shall see, *Love's Labor's Lost* figures prominently in Nuttall's historical perspective on Shakespeare's aesthetics. He argues that, in his earliest plays, Shakespeare develops "thoughts" left inchoate in *Richard III.* But even more important in the early works is the equivocal ending of *Love's Labor's Lost*, which is prompted by the horrific treatment of Holofernes. Although Nuttall refuses to say that, in the final scene of the play, Shakespeare advances "a complex philosophy of language involving not only (mis)representation but also linguistic agency," he does claim that "his play has laid the groundwork for such a philosophy" (99). This is so because, for Shakespeare, the overriding philosophical problem here "is ethical." Shakespeare is not frightened by the "nothing" that postmoderns perceive as the inevitable referent of language. Rather, Berowne's success "haunts" Shakespeare; he is ashamed of "the psychological truth that even if words are variously engaged with the extra-verbal world, we can, by a trick of the mind, focus on the formal expression and so lose full engagement, even while we are still applauding our own cleverness."

Since material in his plays elaborates upon earlier experiences, theatrical as well as personal, and given the importance of religion in Elizabethan England, it is not surprising that Nuttall "recycles" information concerning Shakespeare and Catholicism. There is, for instance, the matter of Malone and the document found in the rafters of the house in Stratford (Nuttall 12). In 2003, Robert Bearman "demonstrated in meticulous detail that there is no basis for the assertion that Campion and Parsons brought the Borromean document to England at this time" (13). Even so, there are many connections between the Shakespeare and Arden families and the Old Religion. Evidence suggests that John Shakespeare shared the views of many of his neighbors in Stratford, an area known as a recusant stronghold. Then, too, it could be that his son, William, married at some distance from Stratford in order to avail himself of a more traditional ceremony. Thomas Jenkins, Shakespeare's schoolmaster, had Catholic sympathies, which may have been echoed at home (14). Furthermore, unlike most English playwrights of the time, Shakespeare portrayed Catholic clerics, Friar Lawrence, Friar

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Thomas, and Friar Francis, for instance, in a favorable light. Conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot stayed for a time next door to the Shakespeare family; and Shakespeare's daughter, Susanna, seems to have favored their Catholic cause, missing Easter communion right after the failed venture. On the other hand, Susanna married John Hall, a Huguenot (14), whom Shakespeare seems to have gotten along with very well. Just because the Shakespeare and Arden families had ties to the Old Religion, it does not follow that Shakespeare was a recusant. He was, after all, a man of substance, who was buried with honor in the local parish church, and one who seems to have taken pains to hide "any hint of specific allegiance" (18).

Nuttall engages the religious issue because it relates to his philosophical interest in Shakespeare's Stoicism, which spills over from his characterization of Brutus in *Julius Caesar* to *Hamlet* (Nuttall 192). The adage, "to thine own self be true," which sounds to Nuttall like a paraphrase of Cato, may emerge from the mouth of garrulous Polonius, but it is indicative of the value that Stoics placed on self-control. Hamlet admires Horatio, because, in the Stoic manner, he is not passion's slave; and when he says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (193), Hamlet sounds like a Stoic, too. But for Nuttall, Horatio is the true Stoic. Hamlet is torn between idealism and empiricism, as were Locke and Hume. (Nuttall returns to Hume when he gets to *Antony and Cleopatra*.) In his remarks on *Hamlet*, Nuttall slips back into the personal mode, declaring the relevance of Freudian theory (199). Freud's explanation makes much in the play "intelligible" to him (200), this despite the fact that, as Nuttall admits, *Hamlet* makes a fool anyone foolish enough to offer "a single positive interpretation" of the text, including Coleridge, who thought that Hamlet's problem was simply that he thought too much (201). At the same time, reminding us that he is writing a book about Shakespeare, the thinker, Nuttall counters his thesis on the foolishness of "single positive interpretations" of *Hamlet* with the "positive" observation that thoughts are making Hamlet sick (202). So, while no one interpretation of *Hamlet* can be ruled out—since "all are relevant to the play" (204)—Nuttall rules in Freud's analysis with more enthusiasm than the others because, by fitting the "sickness" scenario, it is uniquely "relevant to the play." This is an important development in Nuttall's argument. Returning to *Love's Labor's Lost*, he observes that Hamlet is like Berowne, who complains in Act 5 that he is "sick" (202). It might appear that Nuttall tactfully measures his support for the Freudian hypothesis. He does deny "that Shakespeare [ever] committed himself to the lunatic idea that all male infants desire to have sex with their mothers and to murder their fathers" (200). But even that qualification aims to buttress his Freudian thesis: "Hamlet is a . . . manifestly peculiar case." That is, Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex fits this particular work.[2] Hamlet sees himself as a "revengeful," but he knows (Rom. 12:19) that "Vengeance is Mine . . . saith the Lord," and that, under the New Covenant (Matt. 5:38), "revenge should be transcended by love" (203).

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