



## Dramatization of Politics in the Age of Shakespeare

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The article is concerned with the relationship between politics and aesthetics within the context of English Renaissance drama. It is argued that during the Renaissance politics was very much at the centre of all aesthetic reconstructions of reality. Renaissance writers were keenly interested in the problematization of traditional Christian morality by the advent of political realism, and this interest can be found at every structural level of their works. The article examines the reflection of the issue in a recurrent binary pattern of contrasted characters in select plays by Marlowe and Shakespeare.

**Keywords:** politics, aesthetics, English Renaissance drama, Christian morality, political realism. Marlowe, Shakespeare.

Throughout history politics and aesthetics have always been uneasy, yet inseparable, bedfellows. Even at times when literature and art appear to turn decidedly away from political problems, this very act has been seen to have its political significance. In the Renaissance, politics was very much at the centre of all aesthetic reconstructions of reality. Especially in north-western Europe, writers were keenly interested in the problematization of traditional Christian morality by the advent of political realism, and we can find this interest at every structural level of their works. The ensuing brief study sets out to examine the reflection of the issue in a recurrent binary pattern of contrasted characters in some of Marlowe's and Shakespeare's plays.

The Renaissance lived under a dual dispensation as far as human self-esteem was concerned. Hamlet expresses this ambivalence most eloquently in front of his school chums turned spies:

What a piece of work is a man  
 – how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form  
 and moving; how express and admirable in action; how  
 like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the  
 beauty of the world; the paragon of animals. And yet to  
 me what is this quintessence of dust? (2.2. 300–305)

It all started in Florence during the late quattrocento and the early cinquecento. In his 1486 *Oration on the Dignity of Man* Pico della Mirandola proclaimed:

I have come to understand why man is the most fortunate of creatures and consequently worthy of all admiration and what precisely is that rank which is his lot in the universal chain of Being – a rank to be envied not only by brutes but even by the stars and by minds beyond this world. (Cassirer et al. 223)

But Niccoló Machiavelli was much less enthusiastic when, less than thirty years later he wrote in *The Prince*: “One can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers” (96). On this basis he developed a doctrine of practical politics divorced from morals and created one of the greatest intellectual stirs in the history of modern Europe.

Politics was a major preoccupation of sixteenth-century English literature and, particularly, of drama. It would be difficult to think of another period so intent on the representation of national history and so fixated on the problem of political power as the Renaissance. The spread and the importance of the chronicle play in the late 1580s and the early years of the next decade is an unparalleled phenomenon in the development of the English theatre, and it can be argued that after the waning of this genre in the Jacobean age, much of its characteristic interest passed into the heroic tragedy, whose preeminence is unthinkable without the groundbreaking achievements of its less impressive predecessor. Even some comedies, such as *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, touch marginally upon these sensitive issues, for they were born at the time of England's transformation from a medieval fiefdom into a modern state based on a complex and dynamic balance of power.

It is instructive to observe how precisely in that period English words connected with politics developed a rich and revealing ambiguity of meaning. Thus, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the adjective "*politic*" was used from the mid-fifteenth century on to mean "pertaining or relating to a constitutional state," "sagacious, prudent, shrewd; judicious, expedient, skilfully contrived," but from 1580 on it started also occurring in the sinister sense of "scheming, crafty, cunning," and a few years later was substantivized to mean "an indifferentist in matters of religion, a temporizer, a worldly-wise man" (in other words, someone not to be trusted). The word "politician," first registered in 1588, has as its primary meaning "a political person (chiefly in a sinister sense), a shrewd schemer, a crafty plotter or intriguer," and only then, "a statesman."

This duality of meaning has also been discovered in Shakespeare's language by the compilers of a recent glossary of his works, David Crystal and Ben Crystal. Policy, they note, appears in the plays in three distinct senses: (1) statecraft, statesmanship, diplomacy; (2) stratagem, cunning, intrigue, craft; (3) expediency, shrewdness, self-interest. "*Politic*" is used in the sense of: (1) prudent, cautious, discreet, shrewd; (2) crafty, wily, self-serving; (3) cunning, full of intrigue, wily. And "politician" is nothing else but "schemer, intriguer, plotter" (Crystal and Chrystal 337).

One wonders to what extent the political sphere could have acquired its bad name from the traditional north European aversion to Machiavelli's writings on the subject, which were taken to preach immoral license in all matters of state. Machiavelli was clearly demonized by Elizabethan Protestantism and the word "Machiavellian" to this day continues to signify "having or showing skill in using evil means to gain one's own aims, esp. in politics; dishonest" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*).

While it is true that *The Prince* was not translated into English until 1640 and Machiavelli's other writings had to wait even longer, the original texts of these subversive books had found their way into the circles of English intellectuals who could read Italian and, together with other similar works, provided a powerful stimulus for their thinking about the realities of the world. In a letter to Edmund Spenser of 1579, the Cambridge scholar Gabriel Harvey describes the atmosphere of his university in the following way:

You cannot step into a scholar's study but (ten to one) you shall likely find open either Bodin de Republica or Leroy's Exposition upon Aristotle's Politics or some other like French or Italian political discourses. And I warrant you some good fellows amongst us begin now to be prettily well acquainted with a certain parlous book called, as I remember me, Il principe di Nicolo Machiavelli, and I can peradventure name you an odd crew or two that are as cunning in his Discorsi, in his Historia Fiorentina, and in his Dialogues della arte della Guerra too, and in certain gallant Turkish discourses. (quoted in Henderson 11)

A younger man, as keenly interested in politics as Spenser, Christopher Marlowe was going to enter Cambridge University just a year after Harvey wrote this letter and would certainly be exposed to the temptations of the mind described in it. Marlowe's academic life, moreover, would not be confined to culling knowledge from books. His contact with the realities of politics would be closer than that of most other writers of the time. It is known that in early 1587, the poet, who had by then completed his B.A. degree, was granted "grace" to proceed to an M.A. But just then the university authorities had become aware of such scandalous activities of this student that at the last moment they refused him permission to continue his studies. Philip Henderson sums up the situation in the following way:

Indeed, it was rumoured that he intended to join the English Catholics at Dr Allen's seminary for the training of Jesuits at Rheims. At this point Marlowe must have appealed to some influential patron, for a Privy Council resolution of 29 June 1587 was thereupon dispatched

to Cambridge. ‘Whereas,’ wrote their lordships, ‘it was reported that Christopher Morley was determined to have gone beyond the seas to Rheims and there to remain, their Lordships thought good to certify that he had no such intent, but that in all his actions he had behaved himself orderly and discreetly whereby he had done Her Majesty good service, and deserved to be rewarded for his faithful dealing. Their Lordships request that the rumour thereof should be allayed by all possible means, and that he should be furthered in the degree he was to take this next commencement. Because it was not Her Majesty’s pleasure that anyone employed as he had been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed by those that are ignorant of the affairs he went about’. (18)

The categorical tone of this missive leaves no doubt that already in his university years Marlowe was seriously involved in the politics of Elizabeth’s court and, most probably as an agent of Walsingham’s secret service, had access to its inner circles and could collect first-hand impressions from their shady dealings, which later must have proved an invaluable material for his dramatic writings, if not quite advantageous for his own safety.<sup>1</sup>

The first play Marlowe probably wrote right after leaving Cambridge opens with the speech of a stereotypical Machiavel, which nonetheless represents the Italian’s political doctrine fairly correctly, albeit in a simplistic way:

I count religion but a childish toy,  
 And hold there is no sin but  
 ignorance.  
 .....  
 Many will talk of title to a crown:  
 What right had Caesar to the empery?  
 Might first made kings, and laws were then most sure  
 When, like the Draco’s, they were writ in blood.  
 Hence comes it that a strong built citadel  
 Commands much more than letters can impart...  
 Let me be envied and not pitied. (Prologue, 14–27)<sup>2</sup>

This is, of course, *The Jew of Malta*, in which all characters, except perhaps the youngest two, Abigail and her beloved Lodowick, are “scurvy politicians” of the Machiavellian cast, plotting against each other behind each other’s backs and doing their best to win the race on the steep and slippery road to the seat of power by hook or by crook. These, however, are all grotesque caricatures of the *politic* schemer, and T.S. Eliot was perhaps right in calling the play a “farce.”<sup>3</sup> *Edward II*, possibly Marlowe’s last and, arguably, his most accomplished drama, is a much more serious exploration of the topic of politics. The English poet, it seems, set out to apply to his material the principle of his Italian model, i.e. “to represent things as they are in real truth rather than as they are imagined”(Machiavelli 90), but far from simply illustrating the latter’s theory, he included it in the object of his own critical examination.

The opening words of the play quote Edward’s letter to his French minion: “My father is deceas’d. Come, Gaveston,/ And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend” (1.1.1–2). Here, in the perfect syntactic balance of the second line we are faced with a meaningful juxtaposition of the two key notions of the drama

<sup>1</sup> There is a good deal of circumstantial evidence corroborating the hypothesis that Marlowe was murdered by Walsingham’s secret service to prevent him from blurting out what he knew about its shady dealings at a forthcoming Privy Council hearing.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta. Marlowe’s Plays and Poems*, edited by M. R. Ridley. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> In his essay “Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe,” published in *The Sacred Wood* in 1922, T.S. Eliot writes:

If one takes the *Jew of Malta* not as a tragedy, or as a “tragedy of blood,” but as a farce, the concluding act becomes intelligible; and if we attend with a careful ear to the versification, we find that Marlowe develops a tone to suit this farce, and even perhaps that this tone is his most powerful and mature tone. I say farce, but with the enfeebled humour of our times the word is a misnomer; it is the farce of the old English humour, the terribly serious, even savage comic humour, the humour which spent its last breath on the decadent genius of Dickens. (238)

that polarize its world and subject the protagonist to a crushing tension: *kingdom* and *friend*, the political versus the intimate sphere of life. The line also spells out the choice Edward has made between the two, a choice that will turn into his tragic error: the kingdom in this sentence is relegated to the position of a grammatical object and the royal favourite is invited to occupy the subject's place while the king himself is relegated to a mere adjunct. Edward's role as the head of the *body politic* has been "thrust upon him" and he does not rate it more highly than a means by which a cherished personal relationship can be confirmed and re-enforced. The irony of the situation is that the same opening speech reveals the diametrically opposite scale of values embraced by the addressee of the king's letter, who is the focus of his infatuation and the reason for his fatal choice. The Frenchman reacts to Edward's invitation with an outburst of joy: "Ah words that make me surfeit with delight!/What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston/ Than live and be the favourite of a king!" (1.1.3–5).

Mark the indefinite article before the last noun – the patron could be anybody as long as he wears a crown. For Gaveston the intimacy with the monarch is a means of advancement in the political sphere and he gladly anticipates a future when his "knee shall bow to none but to the king" (1.1.19). The life of pleasure that the union of the two promises is the ultimate goal for Edward, but for his minion it is no more than a stratagem with which he "[m]ay draw the pliant king which way I please" (1.1.52).

Gaveston's political game is aimed against Edward's barons, who are outraged by the impudent upstart. Driven by his vanity, he draws his royal lover into it without compunction. It is now that the king's true antagonist, Young Mortimer, steps in. This bold nobleman summons his peers under the banner of revolt for an avowed patriotic cause: he declares before them that he is solely motivated by "a burning zeal/ To mend the king and do our country good" (1.4.256–257). This idealistic cant will be sustained in the public speeches of the rebels throughout the play. Yet we should not overlook the fact that a few lines earlier, after concluding a conspiratorial contract with the queen, aimed at the destruction of Gaveston, Mortimer first blurts out their actual selfish reason for the plot and then hastens to conceal it behind a political smokescreen. If the favourite is brought back from exile, which the barons have precipitated, he says "'Tis not for his sake, but for our avail;/ Nay, for the realm's behoof, and for the king's" (1.4.242–243).

Though the essence of the collusion between the most audacious aristocrat and the queen remains hidden from both his comrades and the audience, it gradually transpires that the alliance of the two is both intimate and highly political, their objective being much more ambitious than Gaveston's elimination and amounting to the usurpation of the throne through Edward's murder and replacement with his son as a minor.

The secondary characters in the play, almost all members of the nobility, are divided into Machiavellian politicians and time-servers like Warwick, Pembroke, Gurney and Matrevis, on the one hand, and loyal subjects or just sympathetic human beings like Arundel, Leicester and Berkeley, on the other. Edward's brother, Kent, undoubtedly belongs to this second category but his devotion to truth and decency is perhaps greater than anybody else's and it compels him to vacillate between the two camps. Justly critical of the king's irresponsible sybaritism and seduced by the patriotic front of his adversaries, Kent makes the mistake that another political idealist of the Elizabethan theatre, Shakespeare's Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, will repeat a dozen years later: he joins the rebels only to find out that their leaders' actual motivation is a self-seeking ambition and their principle is duplicity. Although the Duke is now virtually their prisoner, he attempts to rescue his brother from captivity and eventually meets his death at Mortimer's hands.

Together with honest Kent, we, too, hesitate in our sympathy for the one side of the political scene or the other. Neither party is perfect and well into the play there can be no certainty as to who is right and who is wrong. Interestingly enough, the common people (an important Machiavellian abstraction) are reported to waver between the barons and the king in much the same way. Gradually, however, the major distinction between the two camps becomes clear. Whatever his faults, Edward's feelings, thoughts and intentions, his likes and dislikes, are quite open and straightforward – perhaps too much so. Such behaviour in a prince, according to Machiavelli, is imprudent and, in actual fact, it does not do him any good. Mortimer, the queen, and their closest associates, on the contrary, are exemplary students of the Italian's precepts for political success. They are wily, secretive, dissembling demagogues, who had rather be feared than loved and whose every action is carefully planned with a view to a practical result, irrespective of the casualties it might entail.

The minutely calculated schemes of these deft politicians, including the elimination of the tools of their crimes, seem destined to ensure their final success. But, as the poet/ploughman in Robert Burns's famous poem "To a Mouse" reminds us, "[t]he best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men/ Gang aft agley" (68), and that is

not necessarily occasioned by an unexpected turn of luck but, just as frequently, by the hidden resources of human nature that defy cold-blooded policy. In Marlowe's play, what cuts across all the subtle plotting of Mortimer's world are the close family ties between Edward, his brother and his son, free from any hypocrisy and egoism. These three are always ready to sacrifice themselves for each other and cannot be led astray for long. Two of them indeed fall victim to their perfidious enemy but the third, Edward's son and heir, although still a child, rises resolutely to avenge the deaths of his father and his uncle and to crush under his foot the head of the Machiavellian serpent that looms up behind the throne. Thus, in a final peripeteia, Mortimer is smitten at the moment when he seems to have achieved everything he has been after. Ironically and meaningfully, this accomplished politician receives his mortal blow from the hand of love and loyalty, the two principles of human existence whose reality he has never acknowledged.

Edward III is closely attached to his father by the links of filial affection. But, unlike his father, already in his childhood, he is capable of controlling his emotions without extinguishing them. This heroic ability becomes obvious when, at the very end, suppressing the tears of compassion, the young king sends his villainous mother to the Tower. Here we see the rise of a new, apparently perfect sovereign, who has vanquished the Machiavellian blight in the kingdom and has ushered in a new millennium of politics, not divorced from humanity, a dream that can be found at the heart of the English Renaissance.

This ameliorative pattern, *mutatis mutandis*, is later laid at the foundation of Shakespeare's acutely political dramas: *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*. Other important structural features of Marlowe's play also migrate into the work of the Stratfordian. One of these is the polarization of the plot between a prince who prefers the life of sensual or intellectual gratification to the burden of politics, on the one hand, and an ambitious unscrupulous politician eager to replace him in the seat of power, on the other. *Richard II*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra* are all striking examples of this opposition, and another group of plays, including *Macbeth*, *As You Like It* and *The Tempest*, each to a different degree, deal with the consequences of the rightful ruler's overthrow, the establishment of a tyranny as the logical outcome of the politician's triumph, and the need for its abolishment.

The escape from the political world of rivalry, hate, and strife, wistfully coveted by Edward II in the sympathetic company of the abbot on the eve of his captivity and destruction, "Father, this life contemplative is heaven:/O, that I might this life in quiet lead!" (4.6.20–21), seems to become possible for Duke Senior and Prospero, and, in a somewhat different way, for Timon, too, in the *gotium* that spreads beyond the court and the city's walls, just as it does for Lear, when he has rediscovered the only reliable dimension of life, that of mutual love and care, albeit within the confines of a prison, from which one can observe condescendingly the "packs and sects of great ones/ That ebb and flow by th'moon" (5.3.19–20). Shakespeare will conclude, however, that, except for estranged fools and eccentrics like Jaques, these refuges can only provide a temporary and rather imperfect solace, a moment of withdrawal into maturing introspection, often punctured by the incursions of the outer reality, after which the exiles are bound to return to the actual world of politics in the hope of making it better or, conversely, depart from the sound and the fury of life altogether.

A Marlovian technique that Shakespeare did not overlook in the development of his more complex artistic method is the outgrowing of the schematic division between good and evil characters so typical of the medieval mysteries and moralities from which the secular drama of the Renaissance emerged. The task was far from simple. The political plot, as we saw, was necessarily polarized between the two camps of the villainous politicians and the non-politic, ingenuous personages. Marlowe took pains to modulate this abstract polarity by allowing the basic nature of each group to be penetrated by that of the other. Thus, the good characters in *Edward II* do not remain completely impervious to the mores of Machiavellian policy. Edward, a flawed but largely genuine individual, does not hesitate to contemplate a bacchanalian revenge on his clerical and aristocratic foes after their first insurrection. Even noble Kent is compelled to dissimulate in the company of Mortimer and his gang. On the other hand, the rebels' patriotic orations often ring true enough to make us wonder (together with Kent) if their revolt is not justified after all. The most eloquent of this crew, Mortimer, mystifies us again and again: is he an accomplished master of demagoguery and duplicity or does he only gradually turn from a blunt soldier into a Machiavellian politician? The case with Queen Isabella is even harder to decipher. She is so divided between Edward and his adversary that it is impossible to decide whether she dissembles all the time or goes through a long inner strife before betraying both her husband and her son for the sake of political power or for other unexplained reasons associated with it. And, lastly, self-seeking parasites

like Gaveston and Spenser at the moment of their ultimate trials prove capable of genuine devotion to their master. This complication of character is obviously methodical in Marlowe's last play but he had just started tackling it there and it was then left to his luckier contemporary to refine and perfect.

Was Shakespeare as familiar with Machiavelli's writings as the better educated Canterburian was? We shall perhaps never know how little his "small Latin, and less Greek"<sup>4</sup> were in actual fact (Samuel Schoenbaum, for one, doubts Jonson's estimate),<sup>5</sup> how he had used the lost years between the birth of his children in Stratford and the beginnings of an impressive theatre career in London – in a mysterious Lancaster library or elsewhere. But there is some evidence that he was not quite ignorant of French and Italian. And, certainly, he knew how to listen and accumulate knowledge from chats at the Mermaid Tavern and suchlike places. Machiavelli's name had anyway become the talk of the town by the time the "upstart crow... with his tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide"<sup>6</sup> began to write his great stage tetralogies on his nation's political history.

*Richard II* comes so close to *Edward II* in structure, character building, and themes that at times it is difficult to tell the one from the other. From its opening scenes it introduces us into the already familiar dog-eat-dog world of Machiavellian politics, whose basic rule of thumb was spelled out in the following words of Young Mortimer right after the capture of Edward: "For now we hold an old wolf by the ears,/ That, if he slip, will seize upon us both,/And gripe the sorer, being grip'd himself" (5.2.7–9).

Shakespeare's chronicle play starts with the violent clash between two powerful aristocrats, Richard's cousin Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford, and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, both of them impatient to prove their truths in single combat. It is interesting that, although Holinshed, the undisputed source of the play's story, makes no bones about Mowbray's decisive part in Richard's assassination of his uncle, the Duke of Gloucester – one of the crimes of which Bolingbroke accuses him and for which he challenges him – Shakespeare leaves the mutual accusations of the two contestants in the balance. They are both equally furious and it is impossible to decide who is right and who is wrong. The word "traitor" is bandied to and fro until it is utterly relativized. The situation is repeated later on, at the beginning of Act Four, when another cousin, the Duke of Aumerle, is challenged by Sir John Bagot, again for being implicated in Gloucester's murder. Aumerle, like Mowbray, was, according to Holinshed, involved in the conspiracy, but Bagot's accusation is again boldly countered by him, and nothing is proved one way or another. The overall impression these two outbursts of political passion leave in the audience is that England is torn apart by feuds and rivalries in the highest quarters, and they, of course, provide the necessary background for the central clash, that between the king and Bolingbroke.

Here, again, it is not very easy to take sides. If anything, Richard is less innocent of shady dealings than was Edward, and Bolingbroke has a more convincing reason to rise against his royal cousin than had Mortimer against his sovereign. Richard is not only, like Edward, guilty of having neglected the interests of his kingdom in order to please a throng of favourites and flatterers (if we believe his accusers), but he has also masterminded the killing of his own uncle and, on top of everything else, right after the demise of his banished cousin's father has deprived the heir of "his plate, his goods, his money and his lands" in order to finance a war blamed on his own political ineptitude. This last offence is probably the one that he should have shunned more than any other, for, as Machiavelli warns his reader, "above all a prince should abstain from the property of others; because men sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony" (97). And, indeed, Bolingbroke strikes back without delay. This act is inexcusable in view of the often repeated traditional Tudor belief in the sacredness of the king's person. As Richard himself declares: "The breath of worldly men cannot depose/The deputy elected by the Lord" (3.2.56–57). But, on the other hand, we have heard from this very deputy about his evil intentions concerning the termination of Bolingbroke's exile and we cannot but see the reason for the latter's revolt.

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Jonson's famous stricture of Shakespeare in his ode to the poet's memory commissioned for the 1623 Folio edition of his collected works.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Schoenbaum's *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, p. 70. The factual material regarding the poet's education, gathered and analysed by this most authoritative Shakespearean biographer, undermines the absolute validity of Jonson's pronouncement.

<sup>6</sup> This popular quotation from Robert Greene's pamphlet, *The Groatsworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance* (1592), is generally believed to be a biting allusion to Shakespeare in the early stage of his career as a playwright.

Our sympathies, however, do not remain undetermined for long. At first, Richard's improvidence that has put the whole country in jeopardy, alienated the commons with heavy taxes and the nobles with fines and other exactions, coupled with the hard-heartedness with which he treats his own kin drives us away from him. But little by little the development of the action persuades us that if there is a consistent Machiavellian politician in the play, it is not Richard but Bolingbroke. A skilful demagogue and hypocrite, this character calculates each step of his on the way to the throne and takes good care to disguise it as an act of patriotism. Whereas we have just heard a hint or two about Richard's part in Gloucester's destruction, Bolingbroke's pedantically planned ruthless hunt of the king culminating in his secret execution unfolds in a strained sequence of action and suspense before our agitated minds. Together with the commons of the stage world, we are empathetically drawn back to the deposed monarch in his increasing misery. And this process of re-orientation cannot be reversed even by the persecutor's final touches of magnanimity towards his defeated enemies Aumerle and Carlisle, for these are no more than spurts of humanity in the midst of his widespread purges of all adversaries immediately after the coronation.

But the most important factor for the volte-face of empathy lies deeper than this. It can be found in the play's gradual transference of attention from the mechanism of political plots and counterplots to the protagonist's inner world. From the moment of Richard's enforced descent from the seat of power we start getting to know him as a sensate human being. He is finally left alone to taste the "life contemplative" that Edward yearned for before his end, and in a long series of monologues he begins to probe into the depths of his soul. There is little heroic virtue to be found in it: instead, we are faced with the self-pity of a person almost exclusively focused on the inner workings of his own mind trying to come to terms with a total loss. But it is now that we become aware of the imaginative and emotional potentials of this mind. The wealth of thoughts, feelings and dreams that populates Richard's inner world is overwhelming. It is much more impressive and wonderful than the political schemes of the outer world that have brought about his overthrow and that are now left behind to sink into utter insignificance. Overshadowed by it, the Machiavellian political pragmatism is suddenly reduced to a flimsy though intricate fabric of public life, incapable of wrapping the complexity of human nature. All we can be concerned about at this point is that such a unique inner world can be so easily extinguished and that nothing would be able to replace it. The chronicle play has turned into a tragedy. And any ameliorative ending would prove unnecessary and false, for it would take us back to the shallow layer of politics. Shakespeare has conducted us into another dimension of reality, that of human individuality, and has convinced us that this fragile inimitable vessel contains the ultimate value of existence. This major shift of focus has been achieved by brilliant flights of poetry erupting from the midst of drama.

A decade after *Richard II*, in his mature tragedies, Shakespeare will continue to press away from the political overlay of life into the depths of the individual soul. Of course, there is nothing essentialist about these depths, nothing that precedes and excludes the social fabric. Looking into his inner self, Richard discovers in it the reflection of the densely populated outer reality made up of conflicting wills, of continuous strife and dissatisfaction: "Thus play I in one person many people,/And none contented" (5.5.31–32). Yet it is here, in these inner recesses of the self, that all existence acquires meaning and nobility. From a politician Richard has grown into a human being. He has entered the sphere of ultimate reality, which allows the individual to come into his own.

It is significant that the deaths of politicians in *King Lear* create but small ripples on the surface of the plot. In the catastrophe scene, Albany and even Lear himself react to the message about Goneril and Regan's violent end with indifference. Edmund's death is "but a trifle." The demise of Cordelia and her royal father, however, seem to shake the very foundation of the world and cause "general woe."

Edgar, like Edward III, can be trusted to provide a just and humane rule of his country, at last freed from the evil of Machiavellian policy. Yet the emphasis this time is not on political amelioration: it is rather on the fact that a soul as capacious as Lear's could exist and that in the sway of his passion and the flight of his imagination man could be commensurate with the universe. Also, that unlike the mechanical repetitiveness of policy, this personal greatness is like a miracle – impossible to imitate or reproduce and therefore of unfathomable worth. And this emphasis is achieved once again by the building up of poetic temperature – this time to a degree much higher than anything accomplished so far.

To return for a final summing up to *Richard II*, let us reiterate that in the creation of his characters Shakespeare intertwines policy and humanity in a much more inextricable way than Marlowe had done. This

method turns both Richard and Bolingbroke into credible human beings rather than schematic representations of abstractions. It makes them irreducible to simple types and impossible to formulate unambiguously, as the case generally is with people in real life. The difficulty persists until the very end. Thus we are made to wonder if Bolingbroke's final intention to "make a voyage to the Holy Land,/ To wash this blood off from my guilty hand" (5. 6. 49–50) springs from true penitence for the regicide or is another politic manoeuvre, one last example of the consummate demagogue's skill. Similarly, minor personages like Aumerle remain an unresolved puzzle: is the Duke so resolutely faithful to his king even when it would have been much more prudent to change sides because of his honourable nature or for fear that Richard's enemies might not easily forgive him his past? Is his father, York, lastly a fanatic loyalist, ready to sacrifice his family for the sake of a political ideal or simply a politic coward concerned about his own standing under a new regime? Poised on this divide between the two sets of values, such characters become humanly complex to the point of intriguing inscrutability. A binary opposition so clearly drawn by Marlowe has been largely deconstructed.

This deconstruction is taken even further in Shakespeare's mature tragedies, though the opposition keeps re-emerging in the process. *Antony and Cleopatra* deals with a problem similar to that in *Edward II*: its opening lines focus on Antony's "dotage" which has diverted this brave warrior from his heroic military occupation into the slough of hedonistic pleasure, transforming "the triple pillar of the world.../ Into a strumpet's fool" (1.1. 12–13). The conflict that is going to rack the triumvir, the already familiar one between private life and public duty, is sounded in a paronomastic play on the word "new" that marks Antony's first appearance on the stage. In his reply to Cleopatra's cue "I'll set a bourn how far to be belov'd", the Roman exclaims: "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth" (1.1.17). And at this very moment an attendant enters to interrupt the lovers' cooing exchange with the announcement: "News, my good lord, from Rome" (1.1.18). Cleopatra teases her lover by insinuating that he is a slave of politics and politicians and provokes him to renounce his political identity. Antony, however, is still so closely associated with it that he decides to leave his paramour and depart for Rome. But he is no longer his own man. His parting vow will prove truer than he probably intends it to be:

By the fire  
That quickens Nilus' slime, I go from hence  
Thy soldier, servant, making peace or war,  
As thou affects. (1.3.68–71)

Unlike him, his tawny mistress does not seem to know the distinction between love and politics, and though she has accused Antony of placing the latter above the former, her image of herself is inseparable from her official status. This early outburst of jealousy is revealing: "O, never was there queen/So mightily betray'd! yet at the first/ I saw the treasons planted" (1.3.22–24).

This happens in a world rent apart by political rivalries and intrigues, of which the Alexandrian lovers form an important part. Octavius Caesar, the other triumvir, is to Antony what Mortimer was to Edward and Bolingbroke to Richard – a cold-blooded, calculating politician driven by a towering ambition and taking advantage of his colleague's dotage to push him out of the way. Pompey is of a similar cast of mind though of a lesser stature than Caesar. He is, in fact, not averse to a treacherous assassination of the entire triumvirate invited as guests on his galley, but, like Macbeth, he "would not play false,/ And yet would wrongly win"; like Mortimer and Bolingbroke, he would not pause at making use of a political murder but would prefer not to be implicated in it.

The climax of the play is strangely decentred: instead of witnessing the triumph of Antony and Cleopatra's love, we are informed by their foe, Caesar, about their pompous enthronement in Alexandria as a royal couple together with Cleopatra's numerous offspring. The Egyptian queen has succeeded in enmeshing the Roman in her characteristic symbiosis of love and politics, which is clearly dominated by the latter. Theirs is more of a military alliance than a marriage. Antony is no less generous to his bride than Edward II and Richard II were to their favourites – perhaps more:

... unto her  
He gave the stablishment of Egypt, made her  
Of Lower Syria, Cyprus, Lydia  
Absolute queen.

(3. 6. 8–11)

This is the middle point in the development of the action. Both Lepidus and Pompey have been eliminated and the rule of the world from now on will be contended only between Antony and Caesar or, rather, between Caesar, on the one hand, and Antony and Cleopatra, on the other: the Egyptian beauty thinks of herself as her lover's ally, on an equal footing with him, and is perhaps even more than that, for the Roman has already declared himself her soldier. As far as Cleopatra is concerned, love has flowed into politics to bolster it up. For Antony, by contrast, his political worth is a mere tributary to his growing infatuation with this exotic Acrasia. The triumvir is more and more reduced to her political and military adjunct. As his own lieutenant-general Canidius bitterly confides to one of his men, "our leader's led,/ And we are women's men" (3.7.69–70). It is, therefore, not surprising that, after the unexpected débâcle of the queen's fleet in their first clash with Caesar, Antony retreats on her trail like a besotted schoolboy, left without any political will of his own. He confesses that – rather like the wretched knights held captive in Spenser's Bower of Bliss – his sword has been weakened by his affection. But – unlike Sidney's Astrophil – he does not for a moment question his choice and is content to serve his enchanting mistress. Moreover, Antony is ready to renounce politics altogether and asks Caesar to allow him to live in Egypt or in Athens as a private person. Cleopatra's surrender is, by contrast, politically underpinned. In her self-inflicted defeat, she continues to hold on to her dynastic concerns and "craves/ The circle of the Ptolemies for her heirs" (3.12. 16–17).

Caesar takes care to make the most of his victory. As a consummate Machiavellian, he can be relentless when a broken rival has to be crushed, and that is the position he takes with respect to Antony. At the same time, he adopts the alternative Machiavellian policy of appeasement and the nourishment of false hopes in relation to Cleopatra, for his intention is to capture her alive and present her to Rome as his imperial trophy. Thus, in compliance with his mentor's instructions, Caesar shows himself adept at playing both the lion and the fox. His total success seems absolutely assured, for his dealing with the situation is impeccably methodical.

It is just like Cleopatra who, in spite of her love for Antony, has remained political through and through, to enter into negotiations with the victor and try to secure the best possible deal for herself even at the price of betraying her lover. As for Antony, his desperate last attempt to extricate himself from the fatal impasse into which he has been driven throws additional light on the opposition between him and Caesar. Having rewarded his soldiers lavishly and disbanded his army, the protagonist climbs the last rung of his ascent into the heroic sphere of chivalry: he challenges his adversary to a single combat. Caesar is as unimpressed as a modern politician favoured by the pre-election polls would be if invited to a TV debate by the leader of a declining party. His answer is a mockery of the challenger's romantic rhetoric: "Let the old ruffian know,/ I have many other ways to die; meantime/ Laugh at his challenge" (4.1. 4–6).

Such is the age of Shakespeare: Caesar and Bolingbroke, and Edmund, and Iago have the irony of history on their side and they can well laugh at old-fashioned magnificent gestures. Their cast of mind is soberly pragmatic and their trust lies not in emotional effusions but in the hard reality of numbers. Now Antony's only possible move is to summon the pitiful remains of his military power and, as he puts it, to "make death love [him]" (3.13.192). Love and not fear is what he courts to the bitter end, in spite of all Machiavellian precepts. On the eve of the battle he fraternizes with his soldiers and even sends generous gifts to deserters, inspiring admiration and compunction all around, yet eventually losing control of his troops. Caesar, by contrast, keeps both his feet firm on the ground. He is not out to "make death love him," and the superior odds of his forces, their stricter discipline and clearer orders guarantee his victory.

The Egyptian fleet proves unreliable once more, fickle as its mistress. Now that Antony is furious with her, the queen retires to her monument and sends him word that she has taken her life, instructing the messenger to observe how he reacts to the news. At this crucial moment, she is unnecessarily *politic* in her love and, trying to test her lover's attachment, precipitates his self-destruction. Almost immediately after that, in apprehension of what the false message might cause, she hastens to disabuse him, but Antony has already stabbed himself – he has nothing to live for in a world without Cleopatra, for the political sphere as such has long been void for him. The inextricable blend of love and politics that forms the very essence of this woman has not just ruined the Roman's career but has finally put an end to his life, too.

After Antony's death, Caesar pursues further his political game of keeping Cleopatra alive in order to display her as a royal catch in his triumphal return to Rome. His negotiations with her are entirely dishonest, a mere temporizing stratagem. Cleopatra, on her part, has not lost hope that she could still strike a deal with the Roman victor and continues to bargain with his messengers. When Caesar's scheme is finally revealed, the

queen decides to forego all policy and join her lover in the beyond. For the first time she is able to separate the two spheres of human realization which she has treated as one. For the first time she gives her whole being unconditionally to love, overcoming the innate ambivalence of her nature, her fickleness: “now from head to foot/I am marble-constant: now the fleeting moon/No planet is of mine” (5.2.238–40).

Just as he was robbed of his victory over Antony by the latter’s suicide, Caesar is now “*unpolicied*” (5.1.307) by Cleopatra’s new policy of departing altogether from the world of policy and leaving her partner in the game of double-dealing empty-handed.

All seems to have been lost on all sides. And yet, not quite. After all, Caesar emerges now as the unchallenged conqueror and sole master of the world. He may not have obtained the palpable glory of a pompous triumph that he was so eager to secure, but, in practical terms, he has achieved his ultimate goal, and, if anything, Caesar is a practical politician. But the opulence of glory is nonetheless not a negligible thing in his order of priorities. And glory is precisely what his vanquished enemy gets, instead of him, in full measure – just as Hector gets it after his body has been dragged by proud Achilles around the walls of Troy. The reward that Caesar will never enjoy is poured on the deceased Antony with the same lavishness with which – in the most *non-politic* way – he gave away his love and his wealth, and his magnanimous forgiveness and sympathy too, to all his friends and followers, loyal or disloyal, faithful or false. Enobarbus, Eros and others now return his love unstintingly in acts of self-sacrifice. Even Caesar acknowledges Antony’s greatness and grows uncharacteristically emotional in his parting with a rival that has been his brother, though as different from him as the contending elements that form the world in spite of their endless strife.

But the richest tribute Antony gets for his worth comes from Cleopatra, and this is a tribute that no political and military success can provide, a tribute that can only be offered by love. In a final leave-taking, Antony’s bereaved beloved draws his picture on a superhuman scale comparable to that of Menaphon’s paeon of Tamburlaine’s titanic appearance but inspired by something more powerful than awe:

His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck  
A sun and moon, which kept their course, and lighted  
The little O, the earth...  
His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear’d arm  
Crested the world: his voice was propertied  
As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends:  
But when he meant to quail, and shake the orb,  
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,  
There was no winter in’t: an autumn ‘twas  
That grew the more by reaping: his delights  
Were dolphin-like, they show’d his back above  
The element they lived in: in his livery  
Walk’d crowns and crownets: realms and islands were  
As plates dropp’d from his pocket.

(5.2.79–92)

This is not a reality that can be quantified and taken advantage of. Even Cleopatra, having spoken it, pauses to wonder if what she has just uttered can relate to what actually existed in the physical world: “Think you there was, or might be such a man/As this I dreamt of?” (5.2.93–94). The answer of her interlocutor, an outsider to their exclusive world of love, is, of course, negative. But, as Prospero reminds us, we, human beings, “are such stuff as dreams are made on” and dreams are the stuff from which all legends and myths are woven, that airy yet sturdiest stuff that sustains the long journey of mankind across the desert of its political history to a promised land that may never exist in Caesar’s hard-and-fast reality but that looms large in the universe of love. Shakespeare knew this better than any other chronicler of the progress of humanity towards the impossible dream. He raised the intimate life of his heroes above Marlowe’s world of sensual pleasure into a “marriage of true minds.” And he knew how best to express this highest emanation of human nature in the intense locution of his mature drama. It is at such points that the language of his plays soars into the kind of poetry that can command empathy and that makes the genre of poetic drama so remarkably functional.

In Shakespeare's Sonnets we find the following apotheosis of love that may serve as a key to his entire work:

It fears not policy, that heretic,  
Which works on leases of short numb'ed hours,  
But all alone stands hugely politic,  
That it nor grows with heat, nor drowns with show'rs.

(124. 9–12)

Is this not the bourn where Antony and Cleopatra are now, untroubled by the poisonous admixture of policy in the endless dream of their love? A bourn that can be seen as either metaphysical or aesthetic.

But let us not leave Sonnet 124 before we have considered the continuation and conclusion of the quoted text: "To this I witness call the fools of time,/Which die for goodness, who have lived for crime" (13–14). This is where Shakespeare discerns the greatest victory of humanity over policy: in the final reformation of villainous politicians, whose better nature emerges, however late, called to life by the dramatic proof of love's overwhelming superiority over hatred. In a variety of ways, "the fools of time" include Henry Bolingbroke, Duke Frederick and Sir Oliver de Boys, Laertes, Angelo, Alonso, King of Naples and, above all, Edmund in *King Lear*, who, having experienced the supremacy of his brother's nobility, exclaims at his last moment:

I pant for life; some good I mean to do,  
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send,  
Be brief in it, to th' castle; for my writ  
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia.  
Nay, send in time.

(5.3. 24–247)

As it happens, it is too late for Edmund to mend what so far he has done in order to mar everything. But the circle of humanity has closed through this belated gesture of an unexpected bounty of spirit and has left policy out, in the non-human void. In the dreamy world of Shakespearean poetic drama there is no reserved room for this succubus.

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