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Review of *The Philosopher's English King: Shakespeare's Henriad as Political Philosophy* by Leon Harold Craig

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Leon Harold Craig, *The Philosopher's English King: Shakespeare's Henriad as Political Philosophy*. Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2015, 296 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover).

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Harold Bloom famously declared that Shakespeare “invented” us. Such a claim is hardly hyperbolic: Shakespeare’s plays are perennially performed in parks and theaters across the Western world, and his poetry continues to inform the television, cinema, and literature that shape our culture. It is thus no surprise that scholars and academics find in Shakespeare’s creative legacy a treasure worth plundering, publishing nearly one hundred books per year on the Bard. Unfortunately, the spirit of scholarship on Shakespeare tends to run against the grain of his popular appeal. For while audiences turn to Shakespeare for entertainment, part of that entertainment consists in a pleasure derived from seeing our humanity staged and made visible, a pleasure that presupposes a belief in a nature that we can access through his art. In the contemporary academy, however, Shakespeare’s dramas often become a tool of ideology. Read through the distorting lenses of race, class, and gender, Shakespeare’s timeless poetry gets reduced to the social, political, and religious circumstances of his day only then to be judged and condemned by the prejudices of ours. Shakespeare historicized has nothing enduring to teach.

In *The Philosopher's English King: Shakespeare's Henriad as Political Philosophy*, Leon Craig provides a welcome exception to this rather dreary rule. His work is beautifully written, intelligently conceived and organized, and full of penetrating insights into some of the more difficult textual puzzles posed by the quartet of plays known as the Second Henriad: *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts*

1 and 2, and *Henry V*. According to Craig, the coherence of these four plays consists in their exploration of the questions that attend the foundation and preservation of any decent and stable political order: Who deserves to rule? And what is the basis of such rule? Is it established by divine right? Or does it consist in an excellence grounded in nature? Might the “right ruler”—that is, the person who is most able to secure the genuine good of those whom he rules—also win the consent of the governed and thereby marry just rule with legitimate rule? If not, what are the particular challenges to such a union and how might they be overcome? By showing how these four plays stage for our examination the often vexing challenges confronting political legitimacy, Craig places Shakespeare in dialogue with political philosophers famous for their treatments of these questions, namely, Plato, Machiavelli, and Hobbes.

Lest this sound excessively abstract, the reader will be pleased to discover that Craig begins much more simply. Instead of adopting his hermeneutics from academic vogue, Craig takes the plays on their own terms, rooting his analysis of them in their dramatic tension and character development, the very elements that draw us to Shakespeare’s plays in the first place. By doing so, he shows us how Shakespeare’s audience, armed with neither prejudice nor program, can identify problems that are placed there by the playwright and which, if carefully followed, will open new interpretive vistas for the plays in question and for their relationship to other works in the Henriad. Readers long puzzled by the bizarre dissolution of Richard II’s Welsh forces just before his return from Ireland, or Henry V’s miraculous discovery of the plot against him, to mention just two examples, will find much here to engage their curiosity. And the unity of the Henriad that such readings subsequently bring into view allows Shakespeare’s audience to raise new questions about his artistic and political intentions (xiv–xv).

Craig’s exegesis echoes earlier analyses of Shakespeare’s Histories, like those by John Alvis and Timothy Spiekerman, and it unfolds play by play with each of the first four chapters devoted to one of the dramas. The point of such commentary is to illuminate the significance of the career of Prince Hal, the future King Henry V, to Shakespeare. For while each play “does have its own integrity...lent by its own set of themes and issues,” “the fact remains that the tetralogy as a whole is mainly about the making of this almost legendary figure” (xi). What is so remarkable about this man and his political successes (and failures) that should merit the kind of attention Shakespeare devotes to them? Craig argues that Shakespeare presents Henry V as a king who self-consciously strives to unite his right to rule with a rule that is viewed as legitimate by those he will govern. He thus represents the culmination of

a debate between two rival claimants to rule: divine right, as embodied in Richard II (chap. 1), and the natural excellence found in the cunning and savvy of Bolingbroke, Prince Hal's father, and the man who would become Henry IV (chaps. 2–3). Of course, as the solution to this debate Henry V represents neither his naturally virtuous father nor the divine-right king whom he deposed (chap. 4).

In detailing the numerous and intentional deceptions of Prince Hal, in highlighting his use (and abuse) of that brilliant degenerate Falstaff, and in sketching his tough-minded political and military acumen, Craig revises the traditional reading of *Henry V* and its titular character as the morally upstanding civic hero of England. Instead, the career of Prince Hal is best understood as a novel solution to a political world that has become disenchanted with the notion of divinely authorized rule but that yet requires its rulers to establish their legitimacy if they hope to govern a free people. Hal's morally unconventional methods, both as prince and as king, reflect an intention, embryonic when he first appears in *Henry IV Part 1*, to lay the foundations of a new mode and order. Of course, Henry V dies before he can secure for his heirs the foundation he has laid. And so Craig concludes his work with speculation on how Henry V might have preserved the new monarchy he created (chap. 5).

This admittedly imaginative chapter suggests that the new basis of political rule initiated by this formerly wayward prince would have issued in something resembling a constitutional order whose (primarily military) institutions would ensure the development of a political meritocracy whose virtues are transparent to the nation. Shakespeare's Henry V becomes the avatar for the modern science of politics, a novel solution to an ancient and enduring political problem. If Henry V is "the" king whose newly grounded rule solves a problem facing both classical and modern political philosophy, then one is tempted to conclude that "the" philosopher so ambiguously referred to in the work's title, but never identified in the text, is not simply Shakespeare (to whom Craig always refers as a "philosopher-poet"), Plato (with whom he remains engaged throughout), Hobbes (passages of whose work open every chapter), or even Machiavelli (whose political wisdom Craig frequently uses to highlight Shakespeare's judgments), but in some sense *all of them*. Unfortunately, Craig never explains how philosophers as different as Plato, Hobbes, and Machiavelli might agree about such thorny issues.

In tending to the political themes central to Shakespeare's dramatic poetry, Craig advances the case for taking seriously the Bard as a political

thinker of the highest order, a case that has had many defenders over the last five decades: Allan Bloom, Harry Jaffa, John Alvis, David Lowenthal, Paul Cantor, Jan Blits, Pamela Jensen, Tim Spiekerman, and Craig himself, to name just a few. And Craig acknowledges throughout his book their many contributions as they bear upon his theme. Craig's handling of the ever-expanding scholarly corpus on Shakespeare is most judicious and one of the high points of his work. Interested readers will particularly welcome his treatment of the historical resources that were available to Shakespeare as well as his discussions of where Shakespeare's artistic and political judgments prompted him to depart intentionally from the historical record. To mention just one example, Craig's review of the scholarly debates over Henry's infamous order to kill the prisoners taken at Agincourt is masterful and should bring significant closure to this controversy (174–80).

But Craig's otherwise excellent treatment of Shakespearean scholarship is marred by one glaring absence: he never addresses or acknowledges *Shakespeare's Political Wisdom* by Timothy Burns (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). This is a significant lacuna because Burns, like Craig, treats Shakespeare's work as capable of conveying political wisdom and he does so especially in view of the questions that occupy Craig's treatment (who deserves to rule and on what basis?). For his purposes, Burns focuses mostly on those plays set in non-Christian settings because, as he argues, Christianity diminishes, restricts, and distorts our access to political phenomena, phenomena which are best grasped by classical political philosophy (6–10). Because Craig doesn't engage this book, he never addresses the charge that the Christian context of the History plays prevents us from seeing political phenomena clearly.

The failure to address the possibility that Christian beliefs occlude the characters' ability to manifest political life as it appears all by itself may explain why Craig's treatment of the significance of Henry V is so silent about the plays that are dedicated to the turbulent rule and aftermath of Henry's son. In the opening sentence of his prologue, Craig declares that the "plays of Shakespeare's so-called Second tetralogy, unlike those of the First, constitute a coherent whole in more than an historical sense" (xi). Nothing more of substance is said to defend this assertion about the First Henriad. But if the significance of Henry V to Shakespeare consists in the novel political foundations he laid, then it might be important to know the conditions that prevented others from picking up where he left off. Moreover, reflecting on the plays that continue the historical record (*Henry VI Parts 1–3*, *Richard III*, and *Henry VIII*) suggests that even Henry V might have been unable to fulfill the design that Craig attributes to Shakespeare. For instance, Craig

acknowledges the difficulty facing Henry V's ability to employ the strategy envisioned by his father (the bill urging the seizure of half of the church's property), and thus offers a long-overdue response to John Alvis on this point (130–33; 243n2). But he nonetheless *recommends* this strategy at the end of the book (183–89; 263n10). And this is strange because Craig notes that Henry VIII's victories against the Catholic Church in England nearly a century later were themselves very nearly failures (192). And these victories, such as they were, were made possible in part by the intervening War of the Roses, a blood-soaked conflict which decimated the baronial classes likely to come to the defense of a church under siege by a king whose own claim to the throne was itself contestable. In other words, the political failures produced by Henry VI's excessive piety and the endless blood-letting of the Houses of York and Lancaster discredited the major rivals for rule over England, making it easier for Henry VIII to do what Craig speculates Henry V would have done. While Craig remains confident that an attack on the church by Henry V would have worked, the considerable struggles of Henry VIII would counsel greater caution in such a judgment.

Furthermore, when it comes to the subordination of religious authorities to secular civic powers, Craig hardly needs to speculate on how Shakespeare might have envisioned that occurring, since he addresses this question in *Henry VIII*. There the king overcomes the challenges to his sovereignty by arrogating to himself the right to determine religious appointments in England (as well as to conduct certain sacraments on his own). And the ascension of Elizabeth to the throne, anticipated at the end of that play, begins to attenuate the long-standing practices whereby England determined its rulers, something the newly appointed Cranmer appears to prophesy in his closing praise of Elizabeth's future reign. Of course, Craig could still argue for the greater philosophic depth of the Second Henriad on the grounds that it concerns itself with the causes of the birth of modern politics while the dramas that follow merely illustrate its conditions. But the possibility that Shakespeare should sketch in his Histories the distinction between cause and condition is something that should interest Craig, especially since this distinction validates his approach to Shakespeare; it is the historicist reading, so prevalent today, that identifies cause with condition, making Shakespeare the unwitting mouthpiece for the views of his day. But more importantly, such a distinction supplies the necessary ground for the possibility of genuine political wisdom. And this is something that would be of interest to all philosophers pursuing wisdom, even if those philosophers are also poets and even if that wisdom arises outside "this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" (*Richard II*, 2.1.50).

