



*The Prince and the Poet-On Shakespeare's Machiavelli;*

*A Hermeneutic Essay*

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It can be difficult to read either Machiavelli or Shakespeare without being reminded of the other. Machiavelli's work is a commentary on the power politics that frame Shakespeare's tragedies and histories, and Shakespeare's villains bring to life the inherent dangerousness of Machiavelli's philosophy. Because their writings appear to illuminate each other in this way, because they constantly remind us of each other, several questions arise: what did Shakespeare know about Machiavelli? What did he think of Machiavelli's philosophy as it's normally construed, that is, as a kind of completely unscrupulous political realism? To what extent had the figure of the Machiavel already been articulated within the Elizabethan literary world when Shakespeare got a hold of it? Was the Tutor sense of Machiavelli's thought accurate? If not, what was the pervasive sense of Machiavelli in Shakespeare's culture? The problem of analyzing Iago and other Machiavels as they destroy themselves and everyone around them is most interesting against the backdrop of those larger questions. What's more, these questions lead to an historical sense of how and why our view of Machiavelli is distorted to this day. The persistent mistakes, inherited from the Elizabethans, are to read Machiavelli as if he were advocating autocratic government, as if he had absolutely no morality at all or a kind of devilish penchant for intrigue and assassination, and as if he himself practiced these activities.

While Machiavelli was widely known of, and assiduously read in certain circles, not everyone who knew of Machiavelli or Machiavellianism had necessarily read his works. It was often the popular misconception rather a close reading that influenced writers of the period so strongly, and that's true of Shakespeare as well. Machiavelli's name denoted secrecy, dissembling, and conspiracy. He had a sinister reputation for practicing political murder and deception rather than merely describing it and

acknowledging its inevitability. There are several reasons for that misconception, including the work itself. Machiavelli, like Nietzsche, writes shocking, memorable passages, prone to misreading in the form of decontextualized anecdotes. However, there are also historically specific reasons that the Elizabethans would have been both attracted to and repulsed by Machiavelli. First, his reputation for atheism might have shocked many Englishmen of Shakespeare's time, although a few might have enjoyed flirting with that dangerous idea. The sense was that Machiavelli's philosophy is basically atheistic, which is accurate; but coupled with this is the idea that atheism precluded any ethical convictions at all. The latter idea is more arguable, but it was, and is, widely taken to be true.

Even worse, since Machiavelli was Italian, he might be a Catholic, which was perhaps worse than an atheist, since Catholics were believed to be a threat to the Crown. An atheist per se is perhaps shocking or untrustworthy, but not necessarily treasonous. Protestants tended to attack Catholics for being Machiavellian, and in particular, the Jesuits were especially thought to be versed in treason, always hatching a popish plot against the sovereign. Shakespeare amplifies the association of the Machiavel with Satan when Iago says "I am not that I am" at the end of the first scene, because of course the phrase reverses Yahweh's "I am that I am" in Exodus 3:14 and Paul's "I am what I am" at 1Corinthians 15:10. Worst of all, perhaps, is that Machiavelli was a Republican. Someone who wishes to have a Catholic sovereign is guilty of treason, but someone who desires to live under no king at all is diabolical. Therefore the philosophy of Machiavelli was associated with absolute government and with papal plots on the Queen's life. The Machiavel, then, seems to have represented a particular configuration of moral, religious, political, and cultural threats.

The political and religious context accounts for why the Machiavel is such a complex and powerfully charged figure who, as a character within the plot of a play, can be used to raise theological, moral, social and political questions. This begins to account for the Machiavel's popularity on the stage even before the time of Shakespeare; he is a type perfected, but not invented, by Shakespeare. The Elizabethans regarded Machiavelli

as a kind of “arch-fiend” (as Weissberger phrased it in his 1927 study). He was guilty of everything from atheism to poisoning. As Mario Praz comments, Machiavelli and his followers were so closely associated with poisoning as a technique of assassination that that poison was called “Borgia’s wine.” In his *Apologia* (1539), Reginald Pole, the Archbishop of Canterbury, associates Machiavelli with the devil. According to Theodore Raab, William Maitland was called “‘A Scurvie Scholar of Machiavellius lair’ for his part in the Anglo-Scottish negotiations.” Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was accused of being Machiavellian in an anonymous pamphlet of 1588, and Sir Walter Raleigh’s enemies spoke of him in the same way. Of course, Raleigh actually was one of those who had read and understood the work of the Florentine. From Weissberger’s essay we learn that James VI of Scotland (before he succeeded Elizabeth) called Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth’s secretary of state, “a very Machiavellian” for advising the king to make political use of religion.

Despite the sense that Machiavelli was a kind of devil, or because of it, the English of Shakespeare’s day seem to have been fascinated by the citizen of Florence, just as they were with all things Italian. We know that the Elizabethans published and read Machiavelli, in the original and in translation. Despite a ban on them, there were Italian editions of the *Discourses on Livy* and *The Prince* in 1584, and the *Florentine Histories* was available three years later. A French translation of *The Prince* existed as early as 1553. An English translation of the *Art of War* came out in 1563, and the *Florentine Historie* was translated in 1595. What accounts for all of this interest? The social, political, and military conditions of Shakespeare’s England were very much like those of Florence in the earlier part of the century. An autocratic state and a militarized and highly competitive society, the pervasive fear of conspiracy, the importance of espionage, the presence of accomplished mercenaries, the struggles between the powerful nobles and the emerging bourgeoisie, the dangerous closeness of religion and politics; all of these insured the relevance of Machiavelli’s writings to the Elizabethans.

Maybe these parallels in political culture help to explain why, along with the vilifying popular misreading of him, there were so many Elizabethan thinkers who took

the time and the trouble to read and understand Machiavelli. He was not only a very fashionable writer to know, but his work was regarded as offering essential practical knowledge about how to succeed in court, in political life, and in war. Perhaps the earliest example of direct influence is William Thomas, clerk of King Edward VI's Privy Council, who wrote a *Historie of Italie* (1549) and some letters of advice to the young king that show the direct influence of Machiavelli. His writings had a strong effect on Edmund Spenser, and on Bacon. The literary historian Luciani showed that Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discourse of War* was influenced by the *Discourses on Livy*, and his *Discourses on the Savoyan Matches* (1611) by the *Florentine Histories*. Still, it's true that most of the people in London would have been more familiar with the figure of the Machiavel from the stage than with the actual writings of the Florentine citizen. Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (1592), on which *A Merchant of Venice* is based, has a character called the Machiavel; Praz calls our attention to Lightborn, the villain in *Edward II*, who lists ways of surreptitiously killing people (including with poisoned flowers). In Kyd's *A Spanish Tragedy* (1590), Hieronimo pretends to be insane in order to get his revenge, recalling Machiavelli's advice in Bk. 3 Ch. 2 of the *Discourses*, entitled "That It Is a Very Wise Thing to Simulate Craziness at the Right Time." Hamlet does just the same thing as Hieronimo. It's not clear that Machiavelli's influence is direct here, but it is clear that the Elizabethans were fascinated by ruses, secrecy, and treachery.

For a statesman, it is possible to be a Machiavellian without having read Machiavelli at all. For an Elizabethan, it was certainly possible to accuse someone of being a "Machiavel" without having read the Florentine's works. It was also possible to gain an understanding of his basic ideas through conversation. Here we see the need for historians to define different kinds of influence more specifically; my point is that Shakespeare was heavily influenced by Machiavelli even though there's no reason to think that he actually read his work. For example, Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (published in Venice in 1566), which itself shows the influence of Machiavelli, is the principle source of *Othello* even though Shakespeare himself did not read Italian, and even though there was no English translation during his lifetime. (The *Hecatommithi* is also a source for *Measure for Measure*, which Cilotta-Rubery compared

to Machiavelli's comedy *la Mandragola*). Why shouldn't Machiavelli's writings, which were more readily available than Cinthio's, have had a pervasive influence over Shakespeare's dramatic constructions of politics, history and villainy?

We can see from his plays that Shakespeare had thought deeply about the problem of Machiavellian ethics. The most intensive example is, perhaps, *Othello* (first performed in 1604). Yet the villain Iago turns out to be an atypical example of the Machiavel, since it's not clear that he has any rational aim at all. Ultimately, Iago is a meditation and a warning about the logic of Machiavellian thought. Iago loses control over the strict relationship between means and ends which is the essence of Machiavelli's thought. More typical is Richard III, whose ambitions are more easily recognized than those of Iago, and whose acts of murder and betrayal initially succeed. Richard is not as disturbed as Iago, and uses immoral means simply to pursue his own personal ends. This exposes the crucial difference between the Machiavel and Machiavelli himself. Machiavelli's political rationality demands a firm grip on the purpose of murder, conspiracy, and other extreme measures; they are all to the end of the common good and the security of a republic. In stark contrast, as the plot of the *Othello* progresses, Iago completely loses his grip on the relationship between means and ends that lies behind even the most notorious passages in the *Prince*. Initially, we see Iago plotting against Othello on unclear and tenuous pretexts, and then enjoying dissimulation for its own sake. By the end of the play he does not even seek his own advantage; he has become purely and wildly destructive, without rational purpose. Perhaps Shakespeare means to expose the ease with which the Machiavellian logic of means and ends may be disrupted.

One brilliant aspect of the *Othello* is the way that it connects Machiavellian dissembling with one of the deepest themes of the Renaissance: skepticism. Since the Machiavel is deceptive, he raises questions about skepticism, about trust, about the difference between appearance and reality, and about the effects of dissimulation. Shakespeare's play addresses skepticism not only in terms of the reliability of evidence, but at the deeper level appearance and reality itself. It's the duke who counters

Brabantio's accusation of witchcraft, which is just a stereotype (“thin habits and poor likelihoods Of modern seeming”), with a demand for evidence (“wider and more overt test”) (Act 1, Sc. 3, ll. 125-128). So, skepticism is generated not only by the practices of dissimulation that always characterize life at court, but by the split between appearance and reality which structures human existence itself. Still, life in Elizabeth’s time must have been conducive to secrecy, paranoia, and betrayal. Then, as Stephen Greenblatt has remarked, the theme of improvisation emerges in Iago’s uncanny ability to seize the random opportunity. What “evidence” there is, Othello’s handkerchief, has fallen into his hands by chance. He is able to improvise, to adapt, to the sudden piece of luck instantly, and does not abandon the opportunity to the hope of continued good luck, but leaves nothing else to chance in plotting Othello’s downfall. One is reminded here both of Machiavelli’s advice in *The Prince* not to rely on *fortuna* and Shakespeare’s sonnet XCIV; Iago displays certain virtues essential to a great courtier, but his skill and talent are perverted, rotten, because he uses them for evil ends: “lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.”

To sum up, we can say that the Elizabethans popularly regarded Machiavelli as a kind of ethical monster, a much distorted version of the complex figure who emerges from a reading of his work. This popular misconception was influenced by the character of the Machiavel in the theatre, a figure which Shakespeare perfected, but did not by himself invent. We cannot be sure that Shakespeare read Machiavelli, but we may conclude that Shakespeare was as influenced by Machiavelli as it is possible for him to have been without actually made an intensive study of his works. Shakespeare’s cultural environment was in fact inundated with the thought of Machiavelli, as well as with the image of the Machiavel. Shakespeare, like most other Elizabethans, did not have an unprejudiced concept of Machiavelli, but his interpretation of Machiavelli amounts to a philosophical meditation on the received view. For these reasons, it makes sense to read Shakespeare’s work through Machiavelli independently of any question of direct influence. Instead of just using the Machiavel as a term of invective, Shakespeare’s plays analyze what he knew as Machiavellianism, and his villains force us to meditate on the lethal nature of unrestrained power and ambition.