

# On the Kinship of Shakespeare and Plato

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# Preface and Acknowledgements

My personal engagement with Shakespeare has been fruitful, if short-lived compared to the truly great thinkers discussed in this work. What I now see as a shining pillar of wisdom literature was not always so, and I am certain there is something to be learned from my experience in relation to the situation of the modern young. My first memory of Shakespeare is, I am sure, the prevailing opinion of him in the minds of the many. He is an overcomplicated, impossible to understand bore, assigned by a figure of authority that has no vested interest either in Shakespeare, my own life, or knowledge as such. The young ‘read’ Shakespeare because they must, and many educators by and large begrudgingly go along for the ride. Shakespeare is a task to be conquered, criticized, and forgotten – we are *far beyond this now*, the students hear, but the curriculum dictates we must discuss *where we came from*. This is the environment upon which most young people encounter the master of the English language.

I recall my first revelatory experience occurring shortly thereafter encountering a cigarette of dubious origin during my first year of High School. At the onset of class we were to read aloud *Julius Caesar*, and like the vast majority of my class, I could not possibly have cared less for the boring Bard of Avon; and even less for Rome or any relation to my opinions about politics as such. In my rebellious fervor, I was struck by a

voice that encouraged me to entertain my similarly imprisoned compatriots with an outright mockery of the text. A *daimon* of sorts was speaking to me again. The scene in question was, thankfully, conducive to my approach. Marc Antony's funeral oration probably never sounded so bombastic or overblown, and yet I recall rather vividly that the more exaggerated I pushed my voice to sound, the clearer the language became to me. The more I sought to destroy the text, the more I understood it. The more I understood it, the more I was sure it had to be destroyed. And yet, somewhere in the back of my mind that same voice seemed to wonder, could this be English after all? Might this be saying something important? By the time I reached Antony's fourth insistence that Brutus was indeed an honourable man, the voice in my head spoke up with a stunning suggestion. Is it possible that Antony is mocking Brutus? The young love a good mockery.

The thought rattled me such that the remainder of the lines I read aloud came with equal parts genuine enthusiasm as they did modest exaggeration. I recall being praised by my teacher, although she suspected ulterior motivations, and I dismissed her praise entirely for fear of earnest engagement. I could be anything but honest with myself or others. It was not until several years later, in my final year of High School, that Shakespeare again re-entered my personal and intellectual horizon. By now I was an honour student, free from undue influence, and although I had received technically strong instruction in several of Shakespeare's texts, I encountered him as nothing more than answers on a potential exam; an obstacle to overcome on the path to some place of future employment. Only then could I be free! I do not recall ever having 'thought' about any of his plays in relation to my own life, politics or society as such.

It was not until I saw one particular question, which I learned many years later was added partly as a joke, that my earnest engagement with Shakespeare began. At the bottom of a set of essay questions that required students to dissect the ‘themes’ of a particular soliloquy, list the historical inaccuracies inherent in the plays, or demonstrate Shakespeare’s grasp of gender, sat another revelation. “Prepare an essay that discusses the crucial events of *Hamlet* from the perspective of his parents.” Something about this question intrigued me. What followed was a skewering of Hamlet as I found every opportunity to present him as a cold and uncaring show off, a petty prankster, a slightly modified version of myself. I aimed again to destroy the text, to demonstrate its futility, but now I was armed with a higher vocabulary and like many young men my age, some personal experience with familial strife. I had to understand the text before I could annihilate it. I thought little of what I had done until I received an overly generous grade and exhaustive written response from my teacher. It was that score and the encouragement I received from my unique account that allowed me to take chances on studying Shakespeare seriously in University, and I have not stopped since. He became a parallel foundation upon which I would investigate the great thinkers of the western tradition, especially the Bible. He continues to be a revelation to me.

I have benefited tremendously from the wisdom and guidance of Waller Newell, William Mathie, and the countless teachers and colleagues who have read and dissected Shakespeare with me over the years. I have been welcomed into their homes to read and discuss great works – experiences I will never forget. The arguments that arose from our readings frequently invoked the spirits of Nietzsche, Hegel, Aristotle and Plato in marvelous and fantastic ways. This work would not be possible without them, and I am

forever in their debt for making it so. Abbreviated versions of Chapters 5 and 6 have appeared in the journals of *Philosophy and Literature* as well as *Literature and Theology*.

Both experiences were extremely beneficial engagements with more traditional scholarship and I am grateful for their commentary on my work. To my loving wife Brandy and my children William and Dylan, to whom every significant event I relate back to Shakespeare, I apologize. I cannot thank Brandy enough for her love and encouragement in this rather lengthy endeavour. I am a better husband and a better father for having undertaken this project.

# Introduction

The ancillary benefit of any truly good party inevitably includes the joyous, if partial, recollection of the night's activity in the days, weeks, months, and years that follow it. Such is the case with the conclusion of the *Symposium* - where all we know is constituted by a few fleeting lines of text written by Plato about a second-hand account of a retelling of a party that occurred many years previous. We know that the end of the night saw Socrates drinking from a large goblet and explaining to the half-asleep Aristophanes and Agathon that a true poet ought to identify the genius of comedy and tragedy to be one and the same. He ought to be master of both. We hear very little more on the matter from Socrates, Aristophanes, Agathon, Plato, or any scholar since.

This work is an attempt to take up that very discussion by asking a simple question, what if Shakespeare is that very poet? Would Socrates approve? Would Shakespeare? Reflecting on his teacher Leo Strauss, Harry Jaffa remarked that "Only Strauss could have led me to see that Shakespeare's inner and ultimate motivation was Platonic."<sup>1</sup> Jaffa never took the opportunity to fully explain what he meant by this remark, and we don't get to hear him discuss it at length elsewhere. What this work can do is begin to take some foundational steps toward constructing an argument for understanding Shakespeare and Plato alongside one another and get to the core of what Jaffa means when he says the writings of a brilliant poet like Shakespeare can be accounted for by a 'Platonic' motivation. I approach my task along two parallel, if

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<sup>1</sup> Jaffa, H. (2003) *Strauss at 100*. Claremont Institute.  
<http://www.claremont.org/basicPageArticles/strauss-at-100/#.VOiOAvnF8RU>

uneven lines of argument. First, the somewhat pedantic task of uncovering Shakespeare's explicit use of the Platonic dialogues and associated imagery, the majority of which are new discoveries or significant additions to existing interpretations. The second, more difficult than the first, is an attempt to uncover to what extent the meaning of Shakespeare as such can be interpreted from his use of Plato.

Unlike most recent accounts of Shakespearean interpretation from the lens of political philosophy, I have put tremendous emphasis on working with the existing academic scholarship in order to better understand how Shakespeare is treated in the field. By engaging directly with historical and modern interpretations alongside an exploration of what it might mean for Shakespeare to have some form of Platonic motivation, this work sees an avenue to further participation with a diverse range of academic styles rather than an interpretive approach that begins and ends with political philosophy. It is very clear that Shakespeare owes a tremendous debt to Plato, but what exactly does this mean?

Without a definitive account of Jaffa's precise meaning of 'Platonic motivation', I cannot expect to say whether Jaffa was ultimately right or wrong. What I have done instead is to stand atop Jaffa and other's shoulders by supposing that if "ultimate motivation" is in the final analysis unknowable, perhaps kinship can be more easily demonstrated and further works can build on that foundation. At neither the outset nor completion of this work have I seen a path toward a complete synthesis of Shakespeare and Plato as thinkers, philosophers or poets, but rather as remarkably kindred voices on the same problems of politics, philosophy, poetry, and religion from vastly different perspectives.

By better understanding both thinkers in relation to one another, it is my intention to contribute to an invigoration of a kind of political philosophy that can speak to the ‘situation of the modern young’. In focusing my attention primarily on the more obscure or lesser known Shakespeare plays, I hope to expand the reach of his current academic treatment in political philosophy. We all know about Lear and Hamlet, but what about Apemantus and Posthumus? Might they have something to contribute to the theological political problem that has been overlooked? Shakespeare cannot reconcile the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, but he does not need to. He needs only to demonstrate that the questions Socrates grappled with are the same as his own – and that they have not been dissipated by the onset of modernity in his time or our own.

## Chapter 1: The Literature

One spawn of Shakespeare's genius includes the innumerable volumes of commentary, interpretation, historical investigations, philosophical diatribes and criticism literature that constitute what is commonly referred to as his 'academic treatment'. Although this volume necessarily includes itself with such writings, it is designed specifically to connect Shakespeare directly through close readings of the plays with the other master of the western world, Plato. As such, although I cannot constitute a full treatment of how Shakespeare has been academically dissected through the ages, I can fruitfully discuss the issue under debate here, that being his relationship or non-relationship with Platonic political philosophy. By looking at 'recent' encounters with Shakespeare in the discipline of political theory I will be able to make clear both how my work has benefited and departs from these efforts, and by looking closely at the thought of T.S. Eliot I will endeavour to make clearer these differences by way of demanding an emphasis on the meaning of Shakespeare's entire oeuvre. With the upsurge of Straussian writing in the last few decades, attempts have been made to move Shakespearean analysis away from a literary focus on 'criticism', into something that more closely resembles how Strauss analyzed the Platonic dialogues. Through an attention to the dramatic and poetic form of the dialogues themselves, Strauss and others revealed a way of reading works closely, in fact very closely, in order to draw out subtleties and variances of meaning between different layers of the text. By drawing attention to the authors who have come before me here, my own emphasis will become increasingly clear.

As early as 1857, and perhaps before, a book by Bacon and Hawthorne called *The philosophy of the plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* suggested something similar.<sup>2</sup> They make the argument Shakespeare had to conceal his views about political life because they were not acceptable to be fully represented on stage. This argument goes a long way towards supporting the intricate richness of Shakespearean metaphor as well as the different experience one encounters in watching a Shakespeare play performed as opposed to carefully reading its text. The book suggests a consistent philosophy persists, “underlying the superficial” text of the plays that no professor could have “ventured to openly to teach in the days of Elizabeth and James.”<sup>3</sup>

That philosophy, they suggested, held the potential for a novel and rather wide reaching power of universal enlightenment. The secrets of that philosophy, once they unveiled them, were akin to a “new cave of Apollo, where the handwriting on the wall spells anew the old Delphic motto, and publishes the word that “unties the spell”.”<sup>4</sup> Bacon and Hawthorne attempt to synthesize Biblical and Neo-Platonic teachings consistent with what they were finding in Shakespeare’s texts to argue that by untying Shakespeare’s mysterious writing into bare reason, the quarrels of political life could be solved and a new political science of peace and justice established upon its principles. What they found in untying the spell, however, was something like the natural philosophy of Francis

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<sup>2</sup> Bacon, D.S. (1857). *The philosophy of the plays of Shakespeare unfolded*. New York, Ny.: Groombridge and Sons Paternoster Row.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Preface VIII-IX.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Preface XII. The book argues the system of Shakespeare’s philosophy is consistent with the modern science of Francis Bacon (and others), but these sections of the book are severely lacking in sustained evidence. The notion that philosophers and Shakespeare often needed to conceal their teaching for political reasons, which Delia Bacon, Hawthorne, Strauss, and others have suggested, is in the opinion of this author made in sound judgement and with plenty of supplemental evidence.

Bacon. This present volume, while agreeing with the very real political consequences of publishing anything critical of Elizabethan government, departs sharply from the suggestion that Shakespeare sought to teach anything like the virtues of the modern science of Francis Bacon or anyone else. By seeking to completely illuminate the darkness of the cave, early modern philosophy believed it could eliminate the tension between philosophy and poetry, as Hawthorne and Bacon believed Shakespeare had done. This volume, however, seeks to show rather the opposite sort of Shakespeare, one whose poetic genius seriously rivals that of Plato and thereby reinvigorates this ancient quarrel.

We must note, at this point, that it was Francis Bacon's friend Thomas Hobbes who was amongst the first to believe he had done away with the problematic tension between philosophy, poetry, and politics. Hobbes muses in *Leviathan* that although his doctrine is wholly different from ancient political philosophy, he sometimes worries that his philosophic labour will be "as useless as the commonwealth of Plato".<sup>5</sup> When he considered the problem again, however, he saw that the "science of natural justice" was all that was necessary for modern statecraft to permanently solve the problems of civil unrest. Hobbes claims Plato got it wrong because he required too much of men and too much of philosophy. What was needed was a science that could do more than contemplate the moral and political problems of man; modern philosophy needed to be in accord with natural science by proving all the theorems of moral doctrine so that citizens will know definitively how to "govern and how to obey". If philosophers become scientists whose work becomes concerned only with proving the moral doctrines of the

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<sup>5</sup> Hobbes, T. (1994). *Leviathan: with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668*. New York: Hackett. p243

sovereign, ancient philosophy will no longer be required. In the same vein, revelatory faith and poetics must be turned wholly towards subservience to an earthly, rather than heavenly or spiritual sovereign. Hobbes encapsulates his repossession of ancient philosophy and religion by reminding modern man, “Seeing therefore miracles now cease, we have no sign left whereby to acknowledge the pretended revelations or inspirations of any private man”.<sup>6</sup>

Part of Shakespeare's brilliance lies in the fact that he is able to articulate the modern position while juxtaposing it with the ancient. Shakespeare keeps the quarrel between philosophy, poetry, and politics alive by showing us the possible repercussions of a complete turn to materialism and Hobbes' science of natural justice. In *All's Well that Ends Well*, Lafew says, “they say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence it is that we make trifles of terrors”.<sup>7</sup> I argue that Lafew's commentary here is very clearly Hobbesian in nature. This passage demonstrates an understanding in Shakespeare that modern philosophy's complete dismissal of the supernatural makes way for a modern subject that is afraid only of the sovereign, having conquered the ancient moderating fears of man through a science that simply explains them away. For Lafew, and perhaps also Shakespeare, the most damning consequence of this turn to modern philosophy is the newfound possibility to be “relinquished of the artists”.<sup>8</sup> It is unthinkable to this author that the same Shakespeare who understands the science of modern philosophy to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid p.249

<sup>7</sup> Consider that Francis Bacon, Hobbes mentor, proponent of modernity and contemporary of Shakespeare, used this expression as well.

Bacon, F. (1854). *The Works of Lord Bacon*. London: Henry G Bohn. P.184

<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare, W. (2005). “All's Well That Ends Well” *The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells. London: Clarendon Press. II. III. 5-10

culminate in an irrelevance of poetry to be himself a secret adherent of such a system. Whereas Plato allows for the possibility that artistry could be reformed in an attempt to make men more reflective towards the good, Hobbes' reformation of the 'good' into the 'obedient' means the purview of artistry will be similarly narrowed, if not altogether destroyed. Whatever the results of the conflict between philosophy and poetry in the ancient world, Shakespeare seems to be lamenting the fact that the vibrancy of this conflict is seriously threatened by becoming the handmaidens of the modern political project.

If we are to study Shakespeare not as a proponent of the modern political project, then what is he? Shakespeare defies the usual trappings of any 'systemic' philosophy; he elevates and denigrates poetry, philosophy and political life in various ways throughout his presentation of the history of our world and those of his own imagining. He is a genuine thinker in the sense that he understood and brought to life the timeless conflicts of political thought as only Plato had done before or since. Allan Bloom's book *Shakespeare's Politics* is largely responsible for the reinvigoration of the study of Shakespeare from this political perspective. Bloom uses the introductory essay of his book to launch a largely polemical assault against modern Shakespearean criticism, taking issue with the "New Critics" who Bloom argues weaken great literature's ability to speak to the "situation of the modern young".<sup>9</sup> Bloom refers often, but vaguely, to existing Shakespearean criticism as being guided by an understanding of poetry and aesthetics that came well after the time in which Shakespeare was writing.

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<sup>9</sup> Bloom, A. (1964) *Shakespeare's Politics*. Chicago: Basic Books. P.1

The modern aesthetic movement considers it a defilement of art qua art to believe that an artistic work might reflect nature or that its author may have been trying to teach us something. For Bloom, Shakespeare needed to be re-situated in the context of the meaning of art and drama in Elizabethan times, not our own. To understand an author as he understood himself means first to suppose that the author is wiser than we are and that he or she might have something important to teach us about moral and political problems. Bloom's book is most successful at showing how an awareness of the perennial problems in political philosophy make clearer the themes Shakespeare himself addresses in his plays, especially in the case of *Julius Caesar*, *Othello* and *Merchant of Venice*.

Bloom ties the plays to issues in political philosophy by showing how the cities themselves are important constitutive elements to the characters and themes he presents. Bloom draws out the relationships between the characters in *Merchant of Venice* as though he personally knows them, which depends equally upon a close reading of the text and an openness to infer that qualities of, say, Jewishness or Christianity are as profound and vibrant on the page as they are in life:

Shylock and Antonio are Jew and Christian and they are at war as a result of their difference in faith. It is not that they misunderstand each other because of a long history of prejudice and that enlightenment could correct their hostility; rather, their real views of the world, their understanding of what is most important in life, are so opposed they could never agree. To do away with their hostility, the core beliefs of each man would have to be done away with - those beliefs which go from the very depths to the height of their souls.<sup>10</sup>

In this way, Bloom moves from the particular conflict of Antonio and Shylock to the general conflict of religion and values per say. Bloom treats their ways of life as opposed based on the difference between the letter and the spirit of the law, meaning Shakespeare

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid p.17

presents not only a vivid conflict taking place in a particular historical context, but also partaking in perhaps the most intense theological conflict of the New Testament. Just as Socrates opposed the sophists in the very manner of their education, Bloom is able to bring to light Shakespeare's understanding of the irreconcilable values that underlay his story's dramatic narratives. The conflict in Venice is not far from Jerusalem, or Athens. That Venice must ultimately choose to uphold the claims of one way of life over another hearkens back to the Socratic claim that philosophy is in conflict with the city because it holds the philosophic, and not the political way of life as best. We marvel when Socrates lays down his life for the principle of philosophy, but are strangely aghast when Shylock is coerced into converting to Christianity. Might Shakespeare be inserting himself not only into matters of philosophic and theological conflict, but also the political questions of assimilation and Zionism? Bloom invites these kinds of questions and more.

What thoughtful readers must ultimately consider, however, is how much of this is Shakespeare and how much of this is Bloom? It is clear from Bloom's analysis of the text that he is thinking about theological political conflicts larger than what we can reasonably account for explicitly in the actions of the play. Bloom, the political philosopher, means to draw out these themes and shed light on their meaning and importance in the world today. Bloom enlivens the plays by surrounding the issues with political subtext and religious conflict, allowing Shakespeare to live again for the situation of the modern young.

Bloom's book is largely responsible for inspiring Jans Blits' thoughtful work which deals entirely with interpreting *Julius Caesar* through a political discussion of manliness, friendship, Caesarism, the ethics of intention, and the dichotomy between

Republican and Autocratic government.<sup>11</sup> The considerable merits of these works must be tendered, however, by a rather flimsy attempt to situate their political readings within a coherent theoretical framework. The primary oversight of these kinds of readings of Shakespeare is their over-emphasis on purely rhetorical reasons for a “naive” reading of the plays, in that they dismiss vast volumes of academic treatment simply because they do not care for them. Bloom and his pupils are quite eloquent in describing how the post-Derrida literary world has failed to inspire the young to care for the real world, but does not show us precisely how such readings are theoretically flawed. Indeed, that Bloom's book came under fire in, amongst other places, the *American Political Science Review* for claims that he had willfully ignored a vast amount of existing Shakespearean criticism seems in this specific sense justified.<sup>12</sup>

A.D. Nuttall's *A New Mimesis* is, in a way, an attempt to correct these oversights with an exhaustive overview of the differences between how Shakespeare is read and understood by modern critics and those of his nearer Elizabethan contemporaries.

Nuttall's book is unique in that he retains Bloom's rhetorical power alongside a detailed theory-building:

Our literary culture is at present much more alive, much more active than it was twenty years ago. But there is in this activity something febrile. The very energy, as it accelerates, exhibits more and more the character of a malaise. The ordinary appetite for truth is replaced by a competitive cynicism, which stimulates but does not feed the mind.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Blits, J. (1982). *The end of the ancient republic: Shakespeare's Julius Caesar*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>12</sup> Sigurd Burckhardt. “English Bards and APSR Reviewers” Vol. 54, No. 1 (Mar., 1960), pp. 158-166.

<sup>13</sup> Nuttall, A.D. (2007). *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality*. New York: Yale University Press. P.192

Nuttall's book conjures up these powerful critical images alongside an epistemological justification for what he sees as the re-establishment of literary realism.

Nuttall's theory begins with the proposition that the word reality can legitimately be used without apologetic inverted commas.<sup>14</sup> Beginning with Hobbes' insight that metaphor is the "fool's fire" of the new scientific reasoning, Nuttall traces the evolution of modernity's rejection of literature's ability to imitate, understand or explain the nature of the world. In Nuttall's analysis, Wittgenstein's dismissal of philosophic problems by appealing to the necessarily obfuscating power of language eventually leads to a structuralism and poststructuralism that undercuts the power of literature altogether by supposing we can understand authors better than they understood themselves. Nuttall sums up the opposition to literary realism as being dependent on the following suppositions:

1-The world consists not of things, but of relationships.

2-Truth is something made.

3-The ultimate goal of human sciences is not to constitute man but to dissolve him.

4-Language is prior to meaning.

5-Verisimilitude is the mask in which the laws of the text are dressed.<sup>15</sup>

Nuttall undertakes a thorough critique of each objection in its strongest possible form, allowing the suppositions to blend together when required to keep the argument going. A rather loose mixing and matching of minor-theorists leads Nuttall to post structuralism's greatest mind, Derrida. Connecting him with Heidegger, we see how the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid Preface.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p.8

dissolution of the subject corresponds to dissolution of the real world into mere relations, and eventually towards an “absolute scepticism”.<sup>16</sup> By pushing Derrida to his logical extreme, Nuttall shows that even his most ardent supporters must admit that a critique of language through the use of language will eventually collapse into itself. Once the flawed extremities of the Derridean position are laid bare, Nuttall shows how even the more modest renderings of his philosophy have created a more stable, but ultimately just as vacuous position in literary criticism. Unless we are willing to follow Hume in his supposing that the world might simply be incoherent, there will inevitably be a “last context” in which criticism must entrench its claims, and that is in the world itself. Having dealt with the first four suppositions, however, Nuttall admits that the connection of “fictitious literature” with the context of the real world itself is a harder and more important claim to demonstrate, and the majority of the book is an attempt to build a theory that suggests verisimilitude is possible if we reconstitute Aristotle's emphasis on 'mimesis as probability'.<sup>17</sup>

Nuttall builds on the Aristotelian tradition in order to construct a theoretical basis upon which we may answer the most basic of literary questions: “Is this successfully realistic or not?” Nuttall interprets this to mean that all literature that purports to be probable can be called realistic, and that which truly is probable can be called successfully realistic.<sup>18</sup> What the realist needs most, therefore, is some level of experiential knowledge that allows him to separate the factual and probable from the unbelievable and improbable. While it is true that the real Cleopatra had experiential

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid p.30

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p.49

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p.65

knowledge of an actual person named Mark Antony, does this necessarily leave Shakespeare's presentation as a kind of degraded pseudo-experience? What can Shakespeare offer us that history cannot? Nuttall counters that the “realistic artist, as Aristotle saw, gives hypothetical cases, things that would or could happen...The fiction evokes from us, as we entertain the hypothesis, all the human energies and powers, the incipient commitments and defences which occur in experiential knowing”.<sup>19</sup> The power of fiction is its ability to present purely hypothetical cases, but their success stands or falls upon how these probabilities relate to the reader's experiential knowledge of real things. Important for Nuttall in his analysis of experiential knowledge, however, is an admittedly ‘all too human’ kind of knowing and as such it partakes as much in disclosure as it does withdrawal. Experiential knowing may not be able to take us to wisdom about the first things.

What Nuttall therefore argues for, and where this work follows, is in the necessity of a close reading of the literary text. An author that would seek to imitate nature, as Shakespeare is said to have done, would necessarily rely on a complexity and layering of meanings that produce the same variety of explanations, interpretations, and analysis as the real world itself. We should not become cynical skeptics because literary fiction is at times opaque or difficult, for the nature of the real political world is just as dynamic. When Shakespeare deals with fictional probabilities, it stimulates those faculties of comprehension that allow us to understand the real world; whether the situation stimulates our ability to inquire into the power of love, betrayal, courage, power, dishonour or friendship, the conclusion remains the same. Experiential knowledge is

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid p.75

heightened through participation in the mind's dissemination of what is believable in any presentation of hypothetical probability.

This examination of Aristotelian probability is the theoretical method upon which the greatest contemporary scholars have sought to interpret Shakespeare. Amongst them is a growing movement that wonders how much of the Shakespearean corpus can be related to the wisdom of ancient political philosophy, including Plato. Like Bloom and others, Leon Craig has “old fashioned views about literature”, but he also makes some attempt to argue for the superiority of Shakespeare on a Platonic basis.<sup>20</sup> Craig believes Shakespeare to be a philosophic-poet who (probably) consulted Plato’s *Republic* and was moved by the accounts therein of the “relationship between philosophy and political power”.<sup>21</sup> Craig grounds this contention on an all too brief examination of what the *Republic* teaches about poetry and concludes only with a series of enigmatic statements on the matter. Craig claims, for example, that the true concern of Socrates in relation to poetry is his concern that it will depict an untold number of, “ugly truths about human nature”.<sup>22</sup> In Craig’s reading then, Socrates was not really concerned that Homer and Hesiod’s poetry was false, but rather that it was too true to reveal to society at large. In this way Craig seems to be working within a broader scholarly effort to link Nietzsche and Plato as though the ultimate motivations of their philosophic thinking were the same.

Craig does not provide any textual evidence as to how we may deduce Socrates believed in these dark truths about human nature, nor why, if Shakespeare is such a good Socratic philosopher, he apparently believed he could break with Plato by exploring these

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<sup>20</sup> Craig, L. (2001) *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare’s Macbeth and King Lear*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. P.11.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid p.251

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p.254

terrible depths of human nature in terrifically gory detail on stage and text for the entire world to see. Craig argues that what is necessary is to conflate the nature of poets and philosophers as an avenue into better understanding Shakespeare's work.

While Craig produces tremendously valuable insight into *Macbeth* and *King Lear* on the basis of their ability to produce an entryway into a kind of philosophic thinking reminiscent of Plato, he does not link Shakespeare with the Socratic dialogues in any meaningful way, nor does he believe the two could in any way have been at odds. If Shakespeare is simply another political philosopher, why does he not more vigorously promote it as the best way of life? Thus Craig, as Hobbes had done, dissolves the tension between poetry and philosophy by making its art the simple handmaiden of philosophy. While the present author agrees with the notion that Plato would have come to appreciate Shakespeare's poetry, it is not because the two are both simply 'philosophic-poets', but rather because Shakespeare was able to produce an apology for poetry that demonstrates its continuing utility in a responsible and virtuous regime. Shakespeare takes Plato's complaints about the poets very seriously, while Craig claims they are simply ironic misdirection given that Plato himself produced poetry. Shakespeare, however, gives no account that philosophy and poetry are in perfect accord, and as I will show, goes out of his way (as in *Midsummer Night's Dream*) to show precisely the opposite.

Indeed, Craig does not discuss the particular, and quite specific, complaints Socrates poses to the poets and especially Homer, dismissing vast sections of the *Republic* on account of their irony. Because Plato the educator is much closer to Homer the educator than Socrates would dare admit, Craig says, we cannot take the Socratic

claims against the poets seriously.<sup>23</sup> What links the poets and Plato lies under the surface of the *Republic* and is not spoken, Craig says, for Socrates leaves out the most important attribute of imitative poetry, its necessary use of ‘logos’ or rational speech. Since rational speech must be understood, by which Craig seems to mean interpreted, the first appeal of all poets is necessarily to the rational part of one’s soul and thus poetry shares an intimate parallel with Platonic writing. Craig includes amongst those elements which speak primarily to the rational part of the soul, “cursing and blaming, praying and pleading, apologizing and forgiving” alongside conversing, arguing, and explaining one’s actions. And it is here that we must stop Craig, as he stops his Socrates, and wonder whether the actions from the former list truly correspond with the latter in terms of appeal to the rational part of the soul.

Craig says it is only after the rational part of the soul understands what is being spoken or explained that our feelings get involved and we thus form judgements about the characters or actions depicted.<sup>24</sup> Such an argument is akin to saying an audience member feels no dread whatsoever at the beginning of *Macbeth* until the witches are finished explaining to us how “Fair is foul and foul is fair”. How far can we really take Craig’s argument given the fact the first words of the play are actually stage directions for thunder and lightning - which common sense dictates are placed there in order to induce fear and dread prior to anything “being spoken”. Such a thesis not only deflates the entire basis of the Socratic critique of poetry, and thus denies the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” but also denies the claims the poets themselves make about the impact of their poetry. As has been noted elsewhere:

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid p.257 & 260-266.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid p.264

What we can say is that Craig urges us to think of Shakespeare as somehow engaged in a dialogue with Plato – exactly how is an issue not entirely resolved in Craig’s book...Craig notes that Homer was the educator Socrates denied him to have been, but he also admits that Plato found it necessary to replace Achilles with his own reinvented Socrates. Supposing Shakespeare the wisest of human beings who took pen to paper, must we conclude that for him dramatic poetry ministers to the aims of philosophy?...May we treat as secondary the dramatic consequences that would have resulted had Lear completed the path to philosophy before he reached Dover? Or be sure that philosophy can dispel the terror invoked in and by Macbeth?<sup>25</sup>

Such a hesitation about Shakespeare’s ‘unwavering support’ of philosophy is central to this work. As I will show, Socrates’ obsessive concern with the dangers of poetry is not simply ironic or an esoteric method of demonstrating the true kinship between the two arts, but rather a genuine engagement with a conflict over the soul of man. When one hears Timon wailing incessantly about the various ailments of the human condition, we are emotionally moved not by a rational understanding of his anti-human position, but because his words stir us to feel before we understand.

The dark terror of Macbeth’s soul is not calculated or reasoned to by the audience, it is felt. ‘Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow’ is not strictly rational speech, although it may admit rational inquiry that can clarify the emotional experience of the words themselves. Aside from the confusion of the emotive and rational parts of the soul, the review above raises a more fundamental question still. Does Shakespeare really elevate philosophy to such a position that it can dispel the terror of Macbeth? Or even of treachery and usurpation as such? Are we really to conclude from an overview of the totality of the Shakespearean corpus that a Prospero who throws his staff into the sea

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<sup>25</sup> Mathie, W. Philosophy in Review. *Vol 23, No 1 (2003)* Leon Harold Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear*

would prevail over Macbeth? While there is no denying Shakespeare has moments that demonstrate the sheer power of a command of human philosophy, is he rather not unlike Plato in *his* emphasis on its limits?

That Plato is somehow poetic is the very reason why such a comparison with Shakespeare is warranted, but we must persist and seek to discover precisely *how* they are related. While I argue Plato and Shakespeare understand the relationship between reason and poetry in more or less the same way, it is in their emphasis on the possibilities and consequences for both personal and political liberation where I believe they differ. If we consider Bloom on the question of Plato's poetics, for example, we must note that while he acknowledges the relationship in the dialogues between poetry and reason he does not simply equate them nor disregard claims about the ancient quarrel:

The elusive texture of Platonic thought—so different from our own—can, I believe, only be approached when one becomes aware of its peculiar combination of what we take to be poetry and philosophy. Or, put otherwise, Platonic philosophy is poetic, not merely stylistically but at its intellectual core, not because Plato is not fully dedicated to reason, but because poetry points to problems for reason that unpoetic earlier and later philosophy do not see and because poetic imagination properly understood is part of reason.<sup>26</sup>

We see in Bloom a much more nuanced view of the relationship between poetry and philosophy. Poetry works by revealing “problems” for reason that are not illuminated either by Homer nor subsequent moral philosophies. Only the genius who combines some measure of philosophy and poetry can properly see the problems one presents for the other, never mind the particular solutions prescribed by each dominant part. Poetic imagination is part of reason not because, as Craig would have it, that all communication necessarily begins with rational understanding, but because poetic imagination, *properly*

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<sup>26</sup> Bloom, A. (August 1977). Response to Hall. *Political Theory*, 324.

*understood*, considers itself an indispensable component of a properly functioning rationality as such. In the case of the witches and *Macbeth*, poetic imagination is what prepares the ground inside oneself for a rational grasp of the issues at hand. A rationality that does not feel the fear induced in the opening scenes of *Macbeth* is in fact not rational at all. It is a cold, unfeeling stoicism that both Shakespeare and Plato were quick to dismiss as an incomplete philosophic system.

There is a sense in which the Straussian readings of Shakespeare, although containing considerable insight and textual precision, appear reluctant to deal with Shakespeare's presentation of religious and spiritual inspiration as belying a fundamental reality about the human experience that is at least partly distinct from reason itself. They are very good, especially Bloom, at noting how Shakespeare deeply understood the importance of the interplay between religion and politics, but they are not so good at telling us what this interplay means. If the crux of the theological political problem asks whether religion should rule politics, or politics rule religion, then should we not, if Shakespeare is such a philosopher-poet, expect him to give some kind of answer?<sup>27</sup>

## **Part 2: On Nietzsche**

Nietzsche is one thinker who has rather famously focused his efforts on emphasizing Shakespeare's more desperate moments and declines to pin him down into any definitive answer to the problem above. From the Nietzschean position, the terror of *Macbeth*, for example, provides a crucial kind of antidote or opposition to Socratic

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<sup>27</sup>Smith, S. (1997) *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* . London: Yale University Press. p.2.

philosophy. Nietzsche's emphasis opens up a more complete range of Shakespeare's poetic mode of expression than Straussian interpreters are prone to acknowledge in print. Poetry attaches itself so passionately to emotional experience that, depending on the soul of the receiver, one can see Shakespeare as providing material assistance to tragic or Heraclitan thought. Some Straussians see Shakespeare as they do because they model their souls on Aristotelian virtues, which Shakespeare sometimes does, and sometimes does not. If the Aristotelian virtues are indeed the most complete that man can achieve, then their view of Shakespeare may indeed be vindicated as the best possible interpretation. But if revelation, or poetry, can provide an experience of the highest possibilities for man that is in contrast to or differs in any meaningful way from Aristotle, then their interpretation is necessarily contentious and not at all certainly the best. If Shakespeare is as much of a genius as he has been asserted to be, then there is as much room for 'cool reason' as there is 'divine madness'; Nietzsche simply denies the possibility of uncovering a unified system of moral belief in Shakespeare's work.

Although Nietzsche did not write prolifically on Shakespeare, it is impossible to ignore the importance of his rejection of 'traditional' moral interpretations. Immediately preceding his analysis of *Macbeth* in *Daybreak*, Nietzsche claims in 'A Hint to Moralists' that the history of music and poetry is one of "the disfigurement of the soul".<sup>28</sup> Is this not rather similar to something we might hear Socrates say? Nietzsche characterizes passion as having the effect of detaching artists from the moral philosopher's quest for goodness, and he connects the modern problem of artistry with an inability of poets to grasp the meaning of their own history. In praising Shakespeare, whom he calls "the poet",

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<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1911). *Dawn of Day*. (John Mcfarland, trans) New York: Macmillan Company. P.237

Nietzsche seems to point toward precisely the same condition for poetic excellence as Plato, that being the necessity of self-awareness. Only when the poet is self-aware of human history and his own part in shaping it, can a true apology for poetry take place.

Nietzsche's view of Shakespeare, although flying in the face of two hundred years of established academic criticism, agrees with Plato's assessment of poetry in a very important way:

Whoever thinks that Shakespeare's theater has a moral effect, and that the sight of Macbeth irresistibly repels one from the evil of ambition, is in error: and he is again in error if he thinks Shakespeare himself felt as he feels. He who is really possessed by raging ambition beholds this its image with joy; and if the hero perishes by his passion this precisely is the sharpest spice in the hot draught of this joy.<sup>29</sup>

The rejection of Macbeth's "moral effect" is both shocking and surprising. It is not that Nietzsche believes the majority of the play's audience will leave the play feeling great about the prospects of unbridled ambition, but rather that Shakespeare himself was possessed by a kind of raging ambition that allowed him to hold the image of Macbeth up to himself "with joy". Nietzsche is surely in accord with Plato in ascribing to poetry a kind of madness, although Nietzsche revels in such an image much more so than Plato ever allowed himself to. It is, I think, highly contestable whether Nietzsche was right about Shakespeare's ultimate judgement upon Macbeth, but his genius is in providing an avenue by which we may see the poet as having genuinely grappled with the political problems of ambition rather than simply moralizing them away. It is unthinkable that Shakespeare could have written *Macbeth* without seeing the character's darkness also within himself. Shakespeare, aware of this, allows himself the room to explore the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid p.238

depths of poetry's darkest recesses without ever succumbing to the temptation to remain there.

If Nietzsche makes an error in his analysis, however intentional it may have been, it is surely to have excluded Shakespeare's vibrant Apollonian qualities in favour of an excessively dark and troubled poet:

they, and especially Shakespeare, are enamoured of the passions as such and not least of their death-welcoming moods—those moods in which the heart adheres to life no more firmly than does a drop of water to a glass.<sup>30</sup>

Is Shakespeare enamoured of the passions? Surely. Is he enamoured of the passions at the expense of reason and a concentrated self-understanding of his role in the creation of a more fair, moderate and virtuous England? I will argue not. Shakespeare's "death-welcoming moods" exist, but whether Shakespeare thought them simply superior to the celebrations of life, love, and virtue contained in the comedies and romances is really not supported by his writing habits, nor his move to transcendent spirituality contained in the final plays. The comedies and romances are very akin to Plato's soothing allegorical images because they leave the audience with a sense in which they can understand their place in the regime and feel contentment with the limited scope of their own lives. Shakespeare *is* dark, enamoured of the passions, and quite conducive to violence and death, but not exclusively, and certainly not definitively.

The brilliance of Nietzsche consists in his insistence that we confront the darkness in Shakespeare's poetry. Indeed, it is through this darkness that Shakespeare must make his definitive apology. Shakespeare must show that by giving full weight to the range of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

human experience that includes personal and political horror, the audience can still come out on the other side of the poetry affirming life, justice, and the rule of law. What Nietzsche also provides us is an avenue for understanding how the incredibly broad range of Shakespearean interpretation can in some way be reconciled. For Nietzsche, Shakespeare the poet is unlike Sophocles in that his soul reflects nobility through his massive quantity of work:

The greatest paradox in the history of poetic art lies in this: that in all that constitutes the greatness of the old poets a man may be a barbarian, faulty and deformed from top to toe, and still remain the greatest of poets. This is the case with Shakespeare, who, as compared with Sophocles, is like a mine of immeasurable wealth in gold, lead, and rubble, whereas Sophocles is not merely gold, but gold in its noblest form...But quantity in its highest intensity has the same effect as quality. That is a good thing for Shakespeare.<sup>31</sup>

Quantity, in its highest intensity, cannot reasonably be contained within one unified system of philosophy. As much trouble as Plato gives interpreters in pinning down any kind of 'system' of philosophy, Shakespeare magnifies this problem by accentuating his account of the history of the world with facts, lies, fairy tales, exaggerations, dreams, and wonderfully complex internal monologues. It does not make sense to identify this simply as another form of Platonic political philosophy, but rather to ask if these are stories Plato would be eager to hear at all.

Can Nietzsche help us understand whether Plato would have listened to Shakespeare's apology for poetry? Perhaps most crucial to this work is indeed whether Nietzsche can lend any credence to the idea that Plato may have welcomed Shakespeare back into the reformed city in speech. From Nietzsche's perspective of Plato, the only

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<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1996) *Human All Too Human : A Book for Free Spirits*. (R.J Hollingdale, trans) London: Cambridge University Press. Part 2 Section 162.

thing he and Shakespeare appear to have in common is the dramatic nature of their writing. He would certainly have been repulsed by the idea they shared any kind of philosophic or moral framework. For Nietzsche, Shakespeare was a modern like him, and would have had the good sense to love and enjoy Homer most of all.<sup>32</sup> But when we consider again Nietzsche's love of distinguishing Shakespeare from any traditional moral sense in *Beyond Good and Evil*, it is striking that he refers also to his "astonishing Spanish-Moorish-Saxon synthesis of tastes". It is this synthesis of tastes, Nietzsche says, that distinguishes Shakespeare from the Athenians because his plays would have "half-killed" them with laughter. For Nietzsche this is an attempt to show that Shakespeare is a man that possesses his 'historical sense' and that he would therefore be just as opposed to so-called modern good taste. If we link this half-killing of the Athenians' suggestion with the line of reasoning in the *Symposium* that is left unfinished, does not Socrates ask for precisely this sort of art - an art that did not yet exist in his own time? Something that could both invert logos and preserve pathos? Is not what is needed a poetry that can half kill a people with both laughter and tears? Does not Socrates anticipate the need for precisely this kind of superhuman poet, a master of both comedy and tragedy?

Turning away from Nietzsche the analyst and interpreter, there is also an important element here of Nietzsche the learner. What Nietzsche learned from, he adapted. When reading *Troilus and Cressida*, it is hard to hear Ulysses' speech in 1.3 and not directly compare it with Nietzsche's account of the will to power and the differences between bad and evil in the *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Does Ulysses not sound rather like an unleashed Thrasymachus? Ulysses says:

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<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, F. (2003). *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. (R.J. Hollingdale, trans) London: Penguin Books. Sec.224

Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
 And the rude son should strike his father dead.  
 Force should be right -- or rather, right and wrong,  
 Between those endless jar justice resides,  
 Should lose their names, and so should justice too.  
 Then everything includes itself in power,  
 Power into will, will into appetite;  
 And appetite, an universal wolf,  
 So doubly seconded with will and power,  
 Must make perforce an universal prey,  
 And last eat up himself.<sup>33</sup>

Ulysses' emphasis on what he feels should be the preeminence of strength and power does more than simply anticipate Nietzsche, it seems to animate him. When Ulysses says "force should be right", he stops himself by specifying right and wrong as opposed to good and evil.<sup>34</sup> Ulysses knows that by thinking so, justice will soon lose its name and everything will succumb to the character of power. "Power into will" is what Ulysses calls it, and it is hard to think of anyone but Nietzsche being so profoundly impacted by the assessment. The image of the wolf hunting after the universal prey, too, recalls Nietzsche's famous animal metaphors of hunters and the hunted.<sup>35</sup>

George Bernard Shaw, likewise, claimed that Nietzsche could be expressed in three lines that Shakespeare puts into the mouth of one of his greatest villains, Richard III: "Conscience is but a word that cowards use / Devised at first to keep the strong in awe / Our strong arms be our conscience; swords, our law".<sup>36</sup> What Shakespeare's Richard invites here is a comparison between the repeated association of conscience with

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<sup>33</sup> Troilus and Cressida (1.3.103-124)

<sup>34</sup> Beyond Good and Evil p.32-36.

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1989). On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo. (Walter Kaufmann, trans). Vintage: Reissue Edition. Section 13-14.

<sup>36</sup> Richard III 5.3

cowardice in *Richard III*, and Nietzsche's own sustained evaluations of bad conscience.<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche's understanding of the consciousness of guilt is quite clearly echoed through Richard, and indeed whether Shaw is correct in his assessment or not, it is evident that Nietzsche consulted Shakespeare often as a source of inspiration both as a thinker and a poet. While it is easy to imagine Nietzsche quickly absorbing a play like *Troilus and Cressida* or *Richard III*, it is somehow harder to believe that he ever immersed himself fully in the lighter and more celebratory tones of the comedies. Nietzsche is a kind of precursor to the critical theorists who came to interpret Shakespeare as simply a fellow Marxist, feminist, or poststructuralist like themselves. The world of Shakespeare, however, does not begin and end with any one character or play, however much we may personally attach ourselves to one in particular. Whatever Nietzsche might have missed from the perspective of Shakespeare's entire oeuvre as such, there is no doubt he immersed himself in the wisdom of the texts. Might it be possible, we are poised to wonder, that Nietzsche consulted Shakespeare as though he was a fellow beholder at the table of competing cultural values?

### **Part 3: The Argument**

For a deeper avenue into investigating these issues I turn to the guidance of T.S. Eliot and Wilson Knight. While I cannot dedicate sufficient time to describing the fullness of their own interpretations of Shakespeare, I would be remiss if I did not

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<sup>37</sup> Bonetto, S. (2006) Coward Conscience and Bad Conscience in Shakespeare and Nietzsche. *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 30, Number 2, p. 512-527

demonstrate how their unique account of Shakespeare's genius has in some way inspired the present investigation. Their approaches, while not exactly parallel to each other, belie the same understanding of philosophic poetry and dialogue as do the Straussians, with Eliot going so far as to note in the introduction to *Wheel of Fire* the absolute importance of situating Shakespeare's greatness as a poet within his "doubleness of speech", or his ability to speak on two planes at once.<sup>38</sup> Eliot and Knight approach Shakespeare the same way the Straussians approach Plato, that is, by looking very closely at the text for indicators, especially irony, that enrich our understanding of the political and spiritual issues Shakespeare could not simply discuss openly. In doing so, the result for Eliot, Knight, and myself is a step towards interpreting Shakespeare's work as a whole instead of singling out our favourite plays as indicators of his true intent and our least favourites as marks of his apprenticeship or decline.<sup>39</sup> By looking for a way forward to treat Shakespeare's work as a whole, however complex and mysterious that whole may become, we rightly continue the very old, and recently re-emerging task of interpreting Shakespeare, and not merely criticizing or conflating him.

For Eliot, Shakespeare's genius is a kind of "rag-bag philosophy" that pales in comparison to the "serious philosophy" of Dante, albeit for a very good reason. The pattern of human experience Shakespeare sought to elucidate was "more complex, and his problem more difficult" than Dante ever conceived of.<sup>40</sup> Because Shakespeare has no immediately discernible philosophic system, and thus no imminent design upon our moral behaviour, we must collect a variety of "esoteric hints" upon our conduct that may

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<sup>38</sup> Knight, Wilson G. (1998). *Wheel of Fire*. New York: Routledge Kegan & Paul. Preface XVII

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid* XX.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid* XXI.

in time reveal a philosophic pattern, but only one situated delicately between other religious and philosophic systems. Shakespeare's genius takes on the quality of, "a vision of human nature greater than our own" precisely because it is not straightforward or patently orthodox. For this reason, which Eliot endorses, it must be pursued by a willingness of our "passive voice" to discover Shakespeare, rather than a critical voice which too often serves to obfuscate his elusive nature.<sup>41</sup>

Eliot is famous for having outlined what he called the 'Senecan attitude' in many of Shakespeare's plays. He discusses, for example, that Othello's "have done the state some service" (V.II) speech is an absolute masterpiece because it shows how easily pride can assist man in deceiving himself. Likewise, for Eliot, he was clear in his denunciation of Shakespearean interpreters that result in a Bard that holds political and philosophic positions remarkably similar to his interpreters. He disliked what he saw as the onslaught of Liberal, Tory and Socialist Shakespeares that were crawling out of the woodwork.<sup>42</sup> Although Shakespeare's understanding of the Senecan attitude and even stoicism itself could have been derived from any number of literary sources, it is clear he makes a firm demand on his attentive readers to realize Othello's self-deception for themselves without being explicitly told it exists. While Eliot is right in pointing to this as an element of Shakespeare's unique artistic power, it also calls into question Shakespeare's view of his audience. If we couple the demand on the reader to realize Othello's self-deception for themselves with the necessity of understanding the aforementioned 'doubleness of speech', we arrive at a position where Shakespeare has very cleverly assigned the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid p.3

<sup>42</sup> Murphy, R. (2007) T.S. Eliot: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work. New York: VB Hermitage. P.370

audience of his plays a role very similar to that Socrates does in Plato's dialogues. Because Shakespeare exposes a "universal human weakness" that is only revealed through an awareness of Othello's doubleness of speech, we as the audience spontaneously enact an investigation into Othello's values and motivations. This acts to heighten the effect of the poetry precisely because we want above all else to interject ourselves into Othello's life and help him see the error of his ways, precisely as Socrates might have done.

It is through Eliot, therefore, that my Platonic hypothesis acquires considerably more weight in any careful consideration of the Bard's corpus. Shakespeare does not stop merely at the demand for genuine reflection upon the motivations of his characters in relation to the Socratic demand to "know thyself", he also presents vivid philosophic characterizations of Montaigne, Machiavelli, and Bacon such that it is extremely problematic to claim Shakespeare sides with any or either of them on the essential questions of man.<sup>43</sup> Eliot himself was opposed to such modern interpretations that identify Shakespeare as a mere mouthpiece of Montaigne, Machiavelli, or Bacon. While we know, more or less, where Machiavelli and Bacon prefer to situate the problems and solutions of human nature, we are less sure about where Shakespeare himself sits. This enigmatic quality of Shakespeare brings us around again to Plato, whose 'positions' on the essential questions of humanity are amongst the most hotly disputed of any thinker. No one doubts the strength of Platonic philosophy because of its inability to be decisively pinned down, and I argue Shakespeare crafts his poetry with precisely the same intent.

For Eliot, there is clear support for a separation of philosophy and poetry. He achieves this separation by insisting on showing that one cannot learn everything about

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<sup>43</sup> Hardtford, G.F. (Jan 1990) T.S. Eliot on the Stoicism of Seneca. *English Studies in Africa*. Vol 33.1

Catholic theology from Dante because the poet himself points towards Aquinas.<sup>44</sup> Dante begins from the middle and Aquinas from the beginning. But where does our Shakespeare hypothesis fit in this regard? To whom does he point? Although I claim Shakespeare points towards the Platonic dialogues, even they are not quite enough to fully appreciate the allusions to Christ, never mind the references to modern science or the emerging Tudor dynasty. What Plato does provide is an avenue into understanding the political implications of Shakespeare's *poetry qua poetry*. In doing so, the goal is not merely to understand Shakespeare from a Platonic reference point, but to demonstrate that he understood *himself* in just this way. Not only did Shakespeare understand the political dimension of his poetry, but he was willing to push his art to the very heights of human possibility in order to interrogate, as it were, the Socratic arguments about poetry we find in the *Republic*. Plato is not the end all of interpreting Shakespeare, I argue rather he is the starting point and foundation.

It is easy to tell that Shakespeare pushes the boundaries of 'Platonic' poetry in that his plays are far more dangerous than the Socratic thought experiments concocted in the *Republic*. The spiritual and political ideas, for example, of the Myth of Er are quite similar to the ideas of the afterlife we find so persistently in Shakespeare, but they are formulated by Plato in a *much* more benign way. The Myth of Er is not particularly poetic or beautiful and therefore runs no risk, no horror of leading man astray. That Shakespeare ultimately sides with affirming life is no guarantee that the lovers of his

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<sup>44</sup> Eliot, T.S and Dickey, F. (2015) *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927-1929*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press. P.717

poetry will make the same decision. Macbeth's famous soliloquy, for example, offers for many readers the very real possibility of a strong affirmation of nihilism.<sup>45</sup> Why is this?

I see a Shakespeare who believed it his task, in Socratic terms, to present the argument according to injustice directly alongside the argument according to justice. As such, Shakespeare must account both for the possibility of an unjust man trying to get around the consequences of eternity, and also for the notion that no such eternity exists at all. Thrasymachus blushes in the *Republic* and so we never truly hear a poetic account of the glories of injustice, while Shakespeare permits his Thrasymachean characters sufficient courage to persist in their schemes, jealousies, lamentations and murders. He presents them to us unfiltered by the necessary superiority of the argument according to justice. Shakespeare is outside the thought experiment of the Callipolis and so must perform a different function than Plato's castrated poetry. He must show the superiority of justice whilst giving injustice its absolute due. Shakespeare presents humanity with a genuine choice, whereas for Plato the dialogue's emphatic desire to construct the perfectly just city implies there was never the real possibility of completing the city of perfect seeming. Injustice never receives its 'due'.

Because Shakespeare is willing to commit treason against the ranks of traditional moral poetry, Eliot was willing to see the Bard as in some sense going beyond good and evil. Eliot believed art's foundation rests in its ability to console man "emotionally" as opposed to "intellectually", which distinguishes it in some way from philosophy and

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<sup>45</sup> See also below for the impassioned debates, for ex: Swinburne vs Bradley, between those who see *King Lear* as Shakespeare's nihilistic vision and those who see the play as the redemption of Lear. Bruce, S. (1999) *Shakespeare: King Lear: Essays-Articles-Reviews*. Columbia University Press. P.101-105

systemic religion.<sup>46</sup> The problem for Shakespeare, then, is that he tends towards the intellect in so far as his poetry allows for seeing a variety of beliefs, values, religions, and virtues as both possible and likely. Shakespeare's detachment from any singular ethical, moral, or religious system forces contemplation of a variety of human experience, and such contemplation goes beyond good and evil precisely because it does not appear politically 'practical' or always in good taste. Shakespeare draws us to both emotional peaks and valleys precisely so that we might appreciate the variety of human experience. Without the passionate, haunting darkness of *Macbeth* we would be unable to take either supreme delight or recoil in horror at his ambition; without the emotional resonance of the play itself it may as well be a moral treatise against imprudent kingship, a definition the work most clearly and obviously escapes.

Eliot understands the Shakespearean problem in terms of the interplay between emotion and intellect, and this is what differentiates his investigations from that of the Straussians. They are correct in that Shakespeare is a philosophic poet in the mould of Platonic political philosophy, but only in the sense that the plays are clearly movements in a quest for wisdom as opposed to a modern 'system of belief'. But what Shakespeare does that radically departs from Platonic political philosophy is he must also present the case 'contra Socrates' in its strongest possible terms. Shakespeare must be both Aristophanes and Plato at once.<sup>47</sup> Plato could not bring himself to see Socrates meet his equal, nor lay bare any lasting feelings of futility or doubt, a limitation Shakespeare does

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<sup>46</sup> Williams, G. (1991) *A Study of the Use of Ambiguity in the Writings of T.S. Eliot*. New York, University Press of America. P.105

<sup>47</sup> According to Xenophon, Socrates approved of Aristophanes treatment of him. If so, this considerably boosts the case that Plato would be willing to hear Shakespeare's apology. Xenophon, (1990) *Conversations of Socrates*, (H. Treddenick and R. Waterfield trans) London, Penguin Classics.

not share. Shakespeare does not uphold the premise that the philosophic experience is always and everywhere the best form of life. Shakespeare may not ultimately defy the Delphic Oracle, but through his poetry he casts more doubt on its assertion than Socrates manages to in the dialogues.

For Eliot, the precise meaning of a work is difficult to pin down as it frequently acts on different aspects of our consciousness at one time. Eliot sees the daily lives of men as “mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and an evasion of the visible and sensible world” that only truly great poets can manage to disrupt.<sup>48</sup> Poetry is truly successful when it manages to penetrate to the substratum of our being and make us aware of our own deepest feelings to which the conscious mind rarely penetrates. Shakespeare is successful as a popular poet, then, because he does not let his audience rest in the merely conventional. He heightens his audience’s awareness of what it already struggles with in its deepest recesses, thereby breaking down the process of self-evasion, if only for a short period of time.

Can we not say something very similar is the operative element in Plato? The ‘need’ for philosophy, for Socratic political philosophy, runs parallel with the perceived need for the pre-eminence of the Delphic oracle, to “know thyself”. Socrates uses his discussions of the Delphic Oracle partly as a means to make an apology for philosophy, but also because he genuinely believes the unexamined life is not worth living. Socrates, too, desires to draw his students out from the process of self-evasion, even if his process to draw out such reflection is markedly different from Shakespeare’s; Plato’s *presentation* of this process, even less so. But they all importantly agree as to the evasive nature of

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<sup>48</sup> Moody, D. (1994) *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*. New York, Cambridge University Press. p.215

human beings in their relation to themselves and the polis, as well as the need to bring these evasions to light in the course of one's art.

There is a serious question that occurs as a result of these two different approaches to drawing out self-reflection. Is one more effective than the other? There is a sense of thrill, suspense, and surprise that dominates the works of a great poet like Shakespeare that is simply unrivalled by political philosophy. We may often be amused by *The Republic*, but it is not very common to hear it called thrilling or suspenseful, especially amongst the greatest number of readers. While *The Republic* can penetrate to the very depths of philosophic truth for the serious reader, it holds virtually no sway over the minds of the many. This is the domain of the poet, as Plato recognized, and is therefore necessarily distinct from philosophy in a way the most interpreters do not give full weight to. Shakespeare must excite his audience through the story itself and draw in the 'ideas' through the course of the plot, the audience is never expected to be excited about theory for its own sake.

Underneath the plot there must also be the simplicity of human action and musical verse that intensifies our excitement on a less articulate level. That this "less articulate" level may be absolutely necessary for the unravelling of a complete vision of humanity is attested to just as strongly by Socrates, who in his dying days decides to dedicate himself to music. This complete vision of humanity that Socrates appears to embrace in his dying days is described by Eliot as a "unity of poetic feeling" that is created by the coincidence of comic and tragic modes.<sup>49</sup> Such unity is made real by Shakespeare because he demonstrates its operation in both the highest and lowest levels of society. It was through

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<sup>49</sup>Eliot, T.S. (1920) *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London, Kessinger Publishing. P.81

Shakespeare that Eliot himself moved from belief in poetry as pure sense into what he eventually came to call wisdom. In the Preface to the *Sacred Wood*, Eliot calls poetry “a superior amusement...an amusement *pour distraire les honnetes gens*”.<sup>50</sup> Eliot settles on this not because it is in itself a true or final definition of poetry, but because to call it anything else would be to make it even more false. In viewing poetry this way Eliot takes on a view of the whole, for poetry “tends towards” a significance of meaning. Remarking on Sophocles and Shakespeare, Eliot says “For those who have experienced the full horror of life, tragedy is still inadequate. In the end, horror and laughter may be one...”<sup>51</sup> Without knowing it, Eliot stumbled into the argument we begin to hear at the conclusion of the *Symposium*, and through his efforts we can see much more clearly how Shakespeare fits into the conversation.

Crucial to understanding Shakespeare in this way is an awareness that he never tries to escape his own dramas in order to extol something purely poetic or philosophic. In fact, the last plays seem to exist in order to demonstrate what drama itself can contribute to these fields, without itself becoming interchangeable with them. As Eliot puts it, dramatic verse is distinguishable from poetry and philosophy, but good drama necessarily introduces other interests and values which exceed the demands of the purely dramatic.<sup>52</sup> What Shakespearean plays require in order for the basic plot to function pales in comparison to the sheer weight of the ideas, concepts, and emotions the plays ultimately introduce.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid p.65

<sup>51</sup> Schuchard, R. (1999) *Eliot's Dark Angel : Intersections of Life and Art*. London, Oxford University Press. p.129

<sup>52</sup> *Sacred Wood* p.91

What I believe my work shows, in both broad and very specific ways, is this connection between the upper echelons of dramatic work and philosophic wisdom as such. Great poets succeed by demonstrating situations which arise in a play that establish contact between their characters and our own feelings; they must be comprehensible to us in terms of our daily living. If Plato is right, then there is something similar between Elizabethan England and today that we should be able to uncover through careful investigation of the poets of the time. What this means for this work in a larger sense is that such similarity of the emotions of daily living between Shakespeare's time (and the times he depicts) with our own denies a certain aspect of what is commonly called 'historicity'.

This point increases in importance when we realize that there are magnificent speeches in Shakespeare in which men speak, not out of character, but rather beyond character. Eliot alludes to this phenomenon often and I demonstrate Shakespeare's frequent use of this technique throughout this work. It is one of many tactics Shakespeare uses in order to have his characters speak both about the dramatic action before them in a specific spatial/historical context, and yet also to thoughtful people always and everywhere. Some of his best speeches take on a kind of personality of their own, but most importantly could only have been uttered by the very men and women who give them.

## Chapter 2: The Socratic Defense of Poetry

If we are to entertain the question of the relationship between Shakespeare and Plato, we must first engage in an interpretation of the Platonic critique of poetry that is particularly concerned with its approval or disapproval of Shakespearean themes, plots and characters. By turning here to a close reading of *The Republic*, we can begin to situate Shakespeare within the theoretical principles of the ideal city in speech that Plato constructs. In a transcript from Strauss' investigation of *The Republic*, the first word he speaks on the matter is to situate the Republic alongside Aristophanes' play, *The Assembly of Women*:

**LS:** What does a Platonic dialogue look like? What do you find after the title?

**Student:** A list of characters.

**LS:** In what other books do you find this?

**Student:** Plays.

Strauss uses the Socratic method to show that there is a fundamental similarity between the Platonic dialogues and plays – his interpretations are founded on this very premise of close reading. He differentiates a dialogue from a play only to say that it tends to introduce the additional element of treatise which has “great consequences”. Might this consequence be important in delineating philosophy from poetry? Importantly for Strauss, he notes that Aristophanes' *The Assembly of Women* appears to have been written before *The Republic*, and Plato takes elements from it liberally both as a measure of concurrence and as an opportunity to respond on behalf of philosophy.

In leading us through Aristophanes' play, it's clear that for Strauss we are looking at an anti-democratic play, a mockery of democracy:

This change from democracy to the rule of the women only confirms the basic error of democracy. Universal rule as the means to universal happiness, that is the desire of democracy. A characteristic is pity for the underdog. If that pity becomes political it leads to pitilessness toward those who are not underdogs... In this rule of the women he also holds up a mirror, in which democracy can see itself. Democracy is generally praised in Athens, and the rule of women is thought of as crazy and absurd. What Aristophanes suggests is that this democracy is almost as crazy as the rule of women... The two things which Aristophanes hopes to achieve, that people get some understanding and that they get a laugh, are united in the presentation of a scheme which is absurd.<sup>53</sup>

The idea that men may receive understanding and laughter at the same time is a common goal shared by both Shakespeare and Plato. They also ask a further question, what if these goals could be accomplished in the presentation of schemes which were not, strictly speaking, totally absurd? The effect would be twofold: the emphasis on 'understanding' would seem to be magnified alongside a larger emphasis on making the audience actually feel pity. Strauss understands *The Republic* to have both tragic and comic consequences inherent in its travel 'down' to the Piraeus. The closer we come to the realities of political and social life, the closer we come to tragedy. Shakespeare requires both in order to perform his work.

Although *The Republic* is known for containing one of the most serious and sustained attacks on poetry in history, it is interesting that the first mention of art we hear from Socrates is not criticism at all, but praise. As Glaucon is winding down his speech introducing the terms of the "ring of Gyges" thought experiment, Socrates comments on

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<sup>53</sup> Strauss, Leo. (March 26, 1957) A Lecture on Plato's Republic.  
[\(http://leostrasstranscripts.uchicago.edu/navigate/2/3/\)](http://leostrasstranscripts.uchicago.edu/navigate/2/3/)

the thoroughness of Glaucon's exposition by remarking on how "vigorously" he polishes up the just and unjust man, "just like a statue – for their judgment."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, when Adeimantus undertakes to improve the foundation of his brother's argument by including the necessity to demonstrate the inferiority of the unjust man who has a perfect reputation for justice, Socrates is struck with "wonder" at the brother's nature and claims he was "particularly delighted" with them. (Republic, 368a) Socrates comes off as quite proud with the brothers' initial insight and appears quite happy to take over direction of the conversation for his own aims.

By relating Glaucon's elegance to a statue, Socrates explicitly approves of the brothers' art in that it serves two functions, a capacity to inculcate "judgement" and "delight." The discussion of art therefore begins by showing Socrates is driven by two impulses, the need to examine a man's character in relation to the demands of the city, and a simultaneous impulse to derive delight from such an investigation. For Socrates, delight and merriment is never simply divorced from political theorizing. The Socratic remark about judgment centres on the depiction of the perfectly just man having such a reputation for injustice that he is subsequently whipped, racked, burnt and *crucified*. The remark about delight occurs after Adeimantus requires Socrates to not only demonstrate the superior position of justice, but to show such superiority whether the gods exist or not. The sheer boldness of what Adeimantus demands seems to Socrates rather comedic, and it is after these demands are made that we see Socrates adorn his familiar ironic garb as he induces the boys to "beg" for him to continue. (Republic, 368c) In this way, Socrates has already planted the seeds for the argument we hear in the *Symposium*

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<sup>54</sup> Plato. (1991) *The Republic of Plato*. (Bloom, A trans) New York City, Basic Books. 361D

regarding the true artist's necessary fusion of comedy and tragedy. The implication there that we also see thematically throughout *The Republic* is the insistence that true genius necessarily masters and operates in both modes.

Even further to that, are we not to remark on the fact that the "ring of Gyges" discussion itself reads rather like the outline of a play? Glaucon gives a rather detailed characterization of the main players and even dramatizes scenes regarding the invisibility process. Glaucon says that once the unjust man realizes he can operate outside of traditional morality, he "committed adultery with the king's wife and, along with her, set upon the king and killed him. And so he took over the rule." (Republic, 360a)

Glaucon's tale has all the elements of high tragedy. In fact, the synopsis Glaucon provides is remarkably like the plot of *Hamlet*. Claudius gains the trust of the monarch and moves, silent and unseen, to murder the king, steal his wife and take over the rule of Denmark. *Othello*, too, mirrors a Glaucon-like plot in so far as a woman of perfect virtue acquires a reputation for dishonor she has not earned. Socrates is asked, with a multitude of variously complex stipulations, to show how these plots may be resolved such that we see what justice and injustice "each in itself does to the man who has it" and for the resolution to demonstrate the superior happiness of the life of the just. In modern terms, Socrates is asked to show the interior character of just and unjust men and women who have acquired reputations they do not deserve. Before Socrates has ever even brought up the moral and pedagogical implications of poetry on the young, he has given his explicit approval to a rather intricate and ingenious line of discourse he himself calls a wondrous work of art.

It is in this context that we must understand the Socratic critique of poetry. Socrates has not only remarked on the ability of Glaucon's plots to create room for "judgement" amongst those present in Cephalus' house, but also that such judgments can be made under conditions that produce "delight". It is only Socrates' confidence in his ability to show the triumph of justice in the individual soul as well as the city itself that allows him to experience delight in such rigorous arguments for the merits of injustice. To kill a king and take his wife and crown are acceptable images, so long as one also has the skill and foresight to thoughtfully connect such images with the misery that will ultimately result from such wrongdoing. The challenge given by Glaucon and Adeimantus is for Socrates to show that the poets are wrong when:

They all chant that moderation and justice are fair, but hard and full of drudgery, while intemperance and injustice are sweet and easy to acquire, and shameful only by opinion and law. They say that the unjust is for the most part more profitable than the just... They say that the gods, after all, allot misfortune and a bad life to many good men too, and an opposite fate to opposite men (Republic, 364a-c).

These and many more claims the poets make are not censored whatsoever by Socrates because we have not yet entered the 'city in speech'. In Athens, amongst those in attendance at Cephalus' house in the Piraeus, we are permitted to think and speak about such actions openly and honestly. Glaucon and Adeimantus create the plot and the challenges that the 'hero' of the dialogue, Socrates, must overcome. This procedure is quite similar to the way Shakespeare often uses his plots to quickly set up particular problems for his characters to play out, with the problems of succession, tyrannical ambition and forbidden love in *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* being amongst the most obviously similar examples.

The movement towards the building of the city in speech is parallel to Socrates' movement away from an acceptance of the various delights posed by the challenge of the poets towards a strict intolerance for even the appearance of improprieties. For Socrates, the beginning of injustice is the creation of the luxurious city. It is only by tracing the origins of luxury that we can see the way "justice and injustice naturally grow in cities." (Republic, 372e) It is only what Socrates now calls the "feverish city" that requires imitators, poets, actors and the like. This remarkable broadening of the city brings with it a competition with neighbouring cities over land and resources. The desire for a luxurious city is the beginning of the "unlimited acquisition of money", and thus, the "origin of war".

It should not surprise us, then, if we find in Shakespeare a concern with demonstrating the degree to which a given society governs by virtue of 'need' opposite 'luxury'. *Timon of Athens* presents perhaps the most compelling contrast between these two extremes. The Timon we meet at the beginning of the play is concerned entirely with luxury as he mingles amongst artisans, merchants, jewellers and lovers of war. The end of the play finds Timon outside the city gates, exposed and penniless, eating only roots for sustenance and severely chastising the luxury and selfishness of his former companions. To the inhabitant of the luxurious city, Timon looks like Socrates' sow; to those who reject luxury as Timon and Apemantus do, the inhabitants of the city are unjust thieves, conquerors and flatterers.<sup>55</sup> The decadent luxury of Athens is shown to give rise to particularly violent military leaders, as Alcibiades' savage overthrow of his own

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<sup>55</sup> *Timon of Athens*. Compare Act 1 Scene 1 with Act IV Scene 1 to get a sense of the deep contrast demonstrated between flattery and despair.

democratic Athens suggests. The Alcibiades we meet in *Timon of Athens*, in fact, is precisely the kind of military man Socrates argues against in the creation of the Callipolis.

Indeed, the problem of Alcibiades in a play like *Timon of Athens* is the first thing on Socrates' mind in the discussion of the guardians. How do we guard against, as Newell puts it, excessive erotic passion and lust for glory in educating future political leaders?<sup>56</sup> Upon recognizing the need for the guardians to have an “irresistible and unbeatable spirit”, Socrates wonders whether such natures will not be just as savage to their fellow citizens as they are to foreign enemies. (Republic, 375b) The solution is to create philosophic soldiers who act like trained dogs, friendly to familiar faces and vicious to strangers.

It is interesting that Socrates moves so quickly from saying, “a good guardian is impossible” to suddenly remembering that philosophers are really like “noble dogs” and that this rather instinctual kind of knowledge is all that is required to create perfect guardians who are “philosophic, spirited, swift, and strong”. (Republic, 375d - 376c) Considering how different Socrates' definition of philosophy is here from the variations that come later in the night, it is worth wondering how persuasive the movement from the impossibility of the perfect guardian to a rather pedestrian solution (act like a dog!) really is. We are not told what the guardians would do in case of internal sabotage or an attempted coup; do noble dogs take abuses from their masters? Can they change owners? We are also not told specifically how a philosophic love of learning allows a guardian to

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<sup>56</sup> Newell, Waller. (2016) *Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice and Terror*. New York, Cambridge University Press. p.192

achieve this perfect balance between a gentle and spirited soul. Could this philosophic love of learning be corrupted for use in the guardians more spirited pursuits? I am thinking here of those all too-common undertakings of spiritedness we see so much in high-minded, intelligent conquerors. This, too, is the stuff of tragedy.

## **Part 2: The Ascension of the Poets**

Assuming it were possible, however, to create these philosophic soldier-dogs, how would one do it? Socrates mentions the importance of philosophy to the guardians three times before bringing up the problem of their education. The philosopher-guardians are to be educated according to two models, “gymnastics for bodies and music for the soul”. (Republic, 376e) The music Socrates refers to include the use of speeches and tales that quickly become identified with poetry. Poetry is the first thing young potential guardians must be given because, “at that stage...each thing assimilates itself to the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give to it.” (Republic, 377e) What Socrates really means is that human nature is incredibly malleable in the young and the most effective method of impressing a stamp upon them is through the combination of meaningful music and poetry. The deepest truth about the creation of philosophic guardians, however tenuous or improbable they may be, is that they can only be achieved through the poetic imagination. Poetry, not philosophy, is the first art necessary for the creation of a just regime.

Socrates links the poetic beginnings of a truly good education with the necessity to tell tales that are “false”, although they will surely also contain things in them that are

true. Supervision of the poets is needed in order to make a judgment on precisely this issue: has the poet in question kept a balance between the true and false elements of his story? The fictional elements of the poet's art are those characteristics necessary for the "shaping" of the soul in so far as they arouse the passions of the young. Once their passions are inflamed, the true elements of the story, its depiction of human nature, will make a lasting imprint on a child's character. The false elements are linked directly with the poet's account of the workings of the cosmos, a combination of the actions of the heroes and the gods (the plot) and the degree to which they resemble the likeness of true things (nature). Not shy to depart from his Greek antecedents, Socrates has very specific ideas about which kinds of plots and which accounts of human nature are to be especially avoided.

Socrates shows no hesitation whatsoever in claiming that the man who told the biggest lies about the biggest things was Hesiod in his *Theogony*. (Republic, 378a) Hesiod's tales are so damaging, in fact, that Socrates claims even if they were true they should not be told to everyone, but rather unwoven slowly to a very small number of initiates after significant public demonstrations of traditional piety. The Socratic concern with 'traditional piety' is connected here with the ability of a single story to reveal different truths to different kinds of audiences. The 'false' things Socrates sees in Hesiod trace back to his account of the nature of the gods. Socrates objects to the origins of these stories because they do not unfold a "fine lie"; they are too imbalanced. The meaning of Hesiod's tales are so intrinsically bound up with the contents of the plot itself that no interpretation or revision can be done in order to bring out the prerequisite amount of 'gentility' needed for widespread public dissemination. Socrates implies Hesiod

excessively disregards gentility in favour of spiritedness, making his tales corrupt and thus unfit for pedagogical purposes. Poetry is the first art necessary for the creation of a just regime, but now it is revealed their meaning must adhere to certain philosophic standards, what Socrates will call their “model”. (Republic, 379a)

Socrates says the biggest lie about the biggest things revolves around Hesiod’s presentation of the familial relationships between the gods and centers out Uranus, Cronos and Zeus as chief amongst them. The first thing we learn about Uranus is that he was his mother Gaia’s first born, equal, and eventual husband. Uranus, the heavens, is blessed and so he will forever remain the “ever-sure abiding-place for the blessed gods”.<sup>57</sup> The entire host of Greek gods resides within a kind of blessed and incestuous heavenly framework. Uranus and his mother/wife have a series of additional offspring of which Cronos, time, is particularly terrible and swears to enact revenge on the incestuous lust of his father. Uranus has three more children with Gaia but they are said to be even more terrible than Cronos, and in his hate for his sons Uranus hides them in a secret place in the earth, never for them to see the light of day. Gaia is outraged by such vile mistreatment of her children and so requests her other offspring to join with her in punishing their father for his misdeeds. Only Cronos answers the call, using a sickle to castrate his father whose falling genitals result in the creation of the Titans, to which Uranus in turn swears his revenge. A spirit of revenge animates the tales of the Greek gods from the very beginning.

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<sup>57</sup>Hesiod. (1914) *Theogony of Hesiod*. (Evelyn-White, H trans ) Section 116-138

Cronos, as children often do, comes to bear a striking resemblance to his father. He develops a hatred for his own children and, fearful of the possibility of them overthrowing him and thus coming to “hold the kingly office amongst the deathless gods”, decides to eat them as his wife, Rhea, bears them.<sup>58</sup> Rhea, struck with grief at the loss of so many of her children, consults with Uranus and Gaia to devise a plan whereby her latest son will be born concealed and that great retribution be paid to “crafty Cronos”. Zeus is thus born concealed inside the earth and overthrows his father, seizing the crown of the immortal gods and freeing his brothers and sisters from bondage. Thus begins the rule of Zeus, whose rocky relationship with the other gods and mortal men may be summarized roughly as “So spake Zeus in anger, whose wisdom is everlasting”.<sup>59</sup> The wisdom of Zeus, we are told, is synonymous with his *anger*.

Socrates refuses the origins of Hesiod’s gods to be told in the city in speech because they are unjustifiably severe. They extol the “extremes of injustice” because the continual insistence on revenge taken by the gods is itself unjust. (Republic, 378b) By promoting the most extreme and violent forms of revenge as the key to securing the throne of the gods, Socrates claims Hesiod’s poetry creates a desire in the young to emulate these actions. The most dangerous of the prohibited actions is surely the incestuous relationship between Uranus and Gaia. The relationship itself is unsuitable for the education of the young, but the fact of the incest is not all that is objectionable. Hesiod describes Uranus as rejoicing “in his evil doing” upon the banishment of his own sons, and Gaia’s plan to punish her husband involves turning the rest of his children

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid 453-506

<sup>59</sup>Ibid 561

against him, ending with his very violent castration. Socrates does not suggest that the punishment of unjust deeds is the problem, but rather that the only manner Hesiod suggests for the remediation of injustice is further and further extremes of injustice. Violent revenge is met in turn and the cycle continues perpetually. In Hesiod's presentation, revenge is limited only by the god's ability to craft increasingly deceptive and violent forms of retribution. Socrates recognizes that poetry is society's greatest source of inspiration for great acts both public and private; the greatest and most influential of this poetry is that which society models its values and laws after, its account of the gods.

If we consider the Socratic critique here in relation to what he says elsewhere about the sophists, we will see that Hesiod's presentation of Cronos as a corrupted and spiteful son feeds directly into the pre-Socratic philosophy of flux and the cruelty of fate. If Cronos, time, is shown to despise his own father and children, what can mere mortals expect of their treatment by him? They can expect time to be against them. They might expect that if they are to attain greatness in this life it must be undertaken swiftly and without hesitation; the haste of Cronos leaves no room for rationality. Hesiod's description of the god of time should remind us of Socrates' general condemnation of the sophists, whose art he claims makes the nature of the cosmos out to be essentially combative and strife ridden.<sup>60</sup> Socrates links this sophistic outlook with Hesiod and Homer's poetry which extols the political virtue of anger. Men concerned with outrunning the wheels of fate and celebrating the cruel and combative gods are

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<sup>60</sup> Plato. (1967) *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 3 (W.R.M. Lamb trans) Cambridge, Harvard University Press. Protagoras, 335a-339e and see also Euthydemus, 272a

incompatible with a harmonious and just regime. It is no small coincidence that Socrates singles out Cronos, considering the size and scope of the Athenian festival of Kronia which celebrated his accomplishments and committed sacrifices in his name.<sup>61</sup>

Having singled out Hesiod's tales of divine revenge, Socrates generalizes his position by saying it must never be shown that the "gods make war on gods." (Republic, 378b-e) The prohibition against showing the gods at war extends to young and old alike, but an exception is suggested for certain men who may be able to discriminate between works that possess a "hidden sense." Socrates gives no account of what he means by certain fine poets possessing a hidden sense, but he does say that Hera's binding by her son, Hephaestus' being cast out by his father and "all the battles of the gods Homer made" must never be allowed into the city whether they have a hidden sense or not. The common theme amongst the examples Socrates gives appears to be divine-familial strife and quickness to anger. Socrates is intent on poetry not showing family members doing violent battle with one another because once children see or hear of these tales their opinions on the virtue of these acts become "hard to eradicate and unchangeable." Adults who may be perfectly capable of enjoying and coming up with their own allegorical interpretations of these stories must make a sacrifice for the good of the young who are unable to grasp what is a hidden sense and what is not. Socrates preserves the possibility that certain themes of familial strife may be explored within dramatic poetry, but they

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<sup>61</sup> Cronos was portrayed in the sacrifices with a sickle, reminding one of his ability to harvest crops as well as genitalia. The Kronia festival also had the distinction of having masters and slaves dining together, and even included some elements of role reversal. The role reversal of master and slave is regarded as having the "paradoxical function of supporting conventional social hierarchy." Ogden, Daniel. (2010) *A Companion to Greek Religion*. New York, John Wiley and Sons. p291-292

must not explicitly involve the city's gods. The stories of the city's gods must be purified because they have an influence over how city's come to be "founded", and hence on the establishment of the laws themselves. Once a foundation is secured for the young in these 'fine tales', dramatic poetry would be allowed to explore these darker themes provided they have this "hidden sense."

As Socrates crowns Adeimantus with his new role as founder of a regime, Adeimantus wonders what "the models for speech about the gods" should be. Having been requested to provide a model, Socrates speaks instead of the role of "the god" and the impossibility of him doing evil. The Socratic change from gods to "the god" begin here and except for brief critiques of Homer and Aeschylus, continue with the new form until 381c where his critiques return. The change from gods to god is interestingly centered on the logical necessity of God's absolute goodness and unchangeability, characteristics much more in line with Abrahamic faiths than the Homeric. The subtle change suggests, as we see also in the *Apology*, that Socrates prefers a model for poetry based on monotheistic principles, but his preference does not preclude him from also discussing ways in which the gods of Athens need be censured to bring them in line with this new model.<sup>62</sup> In terms of maintaining the absolute goodness of the gods, Socrates suggests a course of action whereby certain stories may be censored and rewritten rather than removed entirely. While it must never be said that the gods punish the wretched out of jealousy or revenge, there is a principle of punishment that meets the standards of justice Socrates is after:

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<sup>62</sup> Socrates also frequently speaks of "the god" throughout his *Apology*. Plato. (1979) *Plato's Apology of Socrates: An Interpretation, with a New Translation*. (West, Thomas G. trans) Cornell University Press. Section 19a.

If, however, he should say that the bad men were wretched because they needed punishment and that in paying the penalty they were benefited by the god, it must be allowed. (Republic, 380b)

Punishments that can be shown to benefit the wretched are not only allowable, but they “must be allowed”, meaning Socrates actively encourages the development of these kinds of tales. While it will be easy enough for the new poets to show wicked humans being rehabilitated by the punishments of gods and men, it is left as an open question how the punishment of the wicked may be demonstrated in dramatic poetry if they are killed in the process.

### **Part 3: On Death**

The relationship between poetic depictions of death, the afterlife, and manly courage are chief amongst Socrates’ concerns for his new poets. The new poetry need not only refrain from showing the gods fighting, but also establish the possibility for a kind of friendship that will make men courageous and “fear death least.”(Republic, 386b)

The concern with death is primarily a task of the poets because of the logical uncertainties involved. The afterlife requires a certain poetic imagination. Indeed, Socrates does not proceed here on the assumption that he knows precisely what happens after death, but rather that the poets have a special ability to produce works so irresistible that they are “sweet for the many to hear, but the more poetic they are, the less should they be heard by boys and men who must be free and accustomed to fearing slavery more than death.” Socrates admits the power of poetry but also that he is afraid of what it does to the many who hear it. By “more poetic” Socrates has in mind the passionate wailings of the heroes and famous men, chief among them Achilles, who he also refashions before his sentencing in the *Apology*. Socrates is particularly concerned with depictions of

popular heroes because the poets have depicted them as the models *par excellence* of the Greek people. They are the role models upon which their entire education system rests. Model guardians in poetry, above all else, contribute to the creation of excellent guardians in deed.

In the *Odyssey*, Homer describes Achilles' visit to the afterlife as follows:

The soul of swift-footed Achilleus...knew me, and full of lamentation he spoke to me in winged words...'how could you endure to come down here to Hades' place, where the senseless dead men dwell, mere imitations of perished mortals?'...I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on, than be a king over all the perished dead.<sup>63</sup>

Achilles does not merely dislike the thought of being dead, he shows complete disdain for the afterlife as but "imitation" of reality. He says he would rather return to life, enslaved by a destitute man, than to rule over the entirety of the afterlife. We must note at this juncture that Achilles has not arrived in what in Christian terms we would call "Hell", because it is not simply the sinners of Greek society that abide there, but their heroes as well. Odysseus comes across Hercules, amongst the most powerful and revered of Greek heroes, and he too is surrounded by a plethora of miserable dead souls who circle around him like scavenger birds. He asks Odysseus if some "wretched destiny" has also brought him here to rest in an "endless spell of misery."<sup>64</sup> The effect of Homer's poetics, Socrates charges, is to make ordinary citizens fear death above all else. If Achilles and Hercules cannot bear to remain in Hades, how could anyone? The political

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<sup>63</sup> Homer. (1967) *The Odyssey*. (Lattimore, R trans) New York, Harper and Rowe. Section 470-485

<sup>64</sup> *Odyssey* 600-610

ramification is a dampening of the fighting spirit and thus in the battle for liberty, men will choose slavery over valiant death. (Republic, 387b)

Poetry's ability to create loyal warriors for the city is predicated on this possibility of convincing men that "being dead is not a terrible thing." (Republic, 387d) This conversation reveals the extent to which Socrates is overwhelmingly concerned with the education of the guardian class above all others. Order on earth is predicated on harmony in the cosmos in the same way that justice in the city must align with harmony in the individual soul and in the afterlife. The dialectic in Books II and III works like a demolition crew on the myths and tales of the old poets, but the philosophic model they use to deconstruct the problems with poetry's relationship to the regime does not yet possess a fully remedial quality. Socrates points to the need for new poetry and especially a new account of the afterlife, but the conversation has not yet proceeded into the philosophic depths of 'the cave' that provide his interlocutors with a vision of the light of the good that they can base the new poetry upon. We do not need to read any esoteric irony into the text in order to see that by the time Socrates has prepared his interlocutors with enough philosophic depth to begin the process of constituting new model myths, there will need to be significant concessions made. By this I mean that to prevent the nearly impossible scenario of removing all men and women ten years old and above that Socrates admits would be necessary to begin their city's new education, concessions will need to be made with poets and politicians in order to refashion the new philosophic myths into the existing regimes. (Republic, 541a) We will return to this subject again, but for now this need only provide some context for the following portion

of the Socratic critique which poses the harshest criticisms against the poets and imitative poetry in general.

#### **Part 4: On Poetry**

The first condemnation of comic poetry relates back to the argument Socrates makes about the true God not changing his appearance or practicing any form of deception on human beings. Because the best things in nature are those that change the least, the opposite also must be true. (Republic, 381a) Heroes and gods must not be shown to be overpowered with laughter, they are to be as condemned alongside those who “chant many dirges and laments at the slightest sufferings.” (Republic, 388b-389a) The example Socrates gives, however, comes from Homer’s remark about the “unquenchable laughter” among the immortal gods. It is not, therefore, a comic spirit or laughter per se that Socrates condemns, but immoderate excess. To counter the excess of immoderate laughter and cruelty, Socrates proposes the necessity of absolute obedience to one’s political rulers, and the ability of the individual to serve as ruler over one’s own desires for drink, sex and eating. The strictness with which Socrates proposes this absolute obedience is nowhere better displayed than in his forbiddance of lying for private men and his allowance of it for the rulers of the regime, useful as it is to them as a remedy for the sicknesses of the human soul.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Republic, 389c – It is interesting that Socrates here talks of “rulers” but will eventually claim the regime needs to be ruled by the single hand of the philosopher king. Socrates briefly changes “rulers” into the singular for the first time in this passage. The philosopher, it seems, is the only one permitted to lie and is even responsible for catching and punishing lies in others. Socrates calls lies “subversive and destructive” for anyone but the rulers.

Socrates permits a specific kind of lying for the rulers of the regime “in cases involving enemies or citizens.” The incredibly strict division Socrates draws between ruler and ruled as well as the asceticism required of all citizens is, I think, meant to be shocking to Adeimantus. Socrates does, however, begin to spread the seeds of doubt in Adeimantus when he claims that there might someday be a poet who might persuade philosophers with an argument for the reintroduction of lamentation and laughter. To the absolute subservience of private men to their rulers and the need for abstention in excessive drink, sex and eating, Adeimantus notes that Socrates’ arguments are in the right so long as their “deeds are to fulfil speech.” Socrates allows a series of clauses whereby a defense of poetry might be made in order that the dialogue might continue without too much interruption, but also because he admits he is “not poetic.”(Republic, 393d) The defense of poetry then, whenever it does come, will not necessarily appear in a form which might be explicitly called Socratic.

To counteract the devastating critique being laid on the poets of Greek children’s youth, Socrates turns his attention for the first time towards one kind of speech that should be encouraged in this new poetry. While we are not yet given the philosophic account of the divided line or the reality-attaining escape from the cave needed in order for Adeimantus and Glaucon to fully understand Socrates’ suggestion, the account here might be the first step towards establishing what kind of poetry would make a fine argument in defense of the poets against their censoring philosophic founders:

Smiting his breast, he reproached his heart with word. Endure, heart; you have endured worse before. (Republic, 390d)

At first glance, Socrates' praise of this kind of poetry seems only to reinforce his strict demands for obedience to the rulers and laws of the city. Such words are, in fact, an almost exact paraphrase of the demands Shakespeare has his Athenian senate impose on Alcibiades.<sup>66</sup> While it does reinforce an emphasis on obedience to the regime, it also does much more. The passage Socrates quotes here is in reference to Odysseus' return to Ithaca where he finds his wife surrounded by a number of suitors who have taken up residence in his house. Although Socrates would find much to object to in the conclusion of the *Odyssey*, specifically the account of the gods deceiving men and quarrelling with one another, he has for the first time singled out a poetic quality in Homer that is conducive to the just regime. The passage shows Odysseus in conversation with himself, in great distress over the shame of the suitors and in turn his violent rage and desire to murder them. Homer says here that Odysseus was able to "smite his breast" by pondering his own rage "in the division of mind and spirit."<sup>67</sup>

Odysseus contemplates his situation by placing his excessive spiritedness to one side. Although his "heart was growling inside him as he looked on these wicked actions", he postpones his own action because of a memory. Odysseus recalls escaping from the Cyclops and says to himself, "intelligence got you out of the cave." Socrates points to this passage not only as a prefiguring of the kind of stoic self-mastery he wants to educate the citizens of his city in speech towards, but also to indicate that the best method for creating a new poetic account of the soul is by reforming popular stories and

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<sup>66</sup> See more on this in Chapter 6. I believe the similarity of the stoic attitudes reinforces my position that Shakespeare should have us see the Athenian senate as incredibly strict, but necessarily so against the extreme excess of Alcibiades, also the concern of Socrates' here.

<sup>67</sup> Republic, Book XX line 10

images already existent in one's culture. Odysseus pauses, separates mind from spirit, and in not acting rashly is able to hear the noble lamentation of his wife regarding her undying love for him. Rationality allowed him to escape from the cave, and intelligence in action will allow him to regain his lost love. Socrates, in Book VII, will show how a philosophic re-examination of this popular 'escape from a cave' plot can successfully tap into images already familiar to a culture. It is the only suggested example of excellent poetry by Socrates thus far in the *Republic*, and its significance cannot be overlooked, especially in light of Shakespeare's well-documented reformation of common themes and stories already well known to his people.<sup>68</sup>

Socrates concludes his critique of the substance of poetry by briefly turning to 'ordinary' human beings. Having dealt with the censorship of the gods and heroes in such great detail, Socrates claims it impossible to fully discuss the speeches of everyday mortals because they must first discover "what sort of a thing justice is and how it by nature profits the man who possesses it". Whatever the new poetry is to look like, we know it will have something to say about the profitability of justice as it occurs in nature. The new poetry will be of two kinds, it can constitute Socrates' previous example of "endurance" speech, or it will rebuke the baseness of injustice:

We'll say that what both poets and prose writers say concerning the most important things about human beings is bad – that many happy men are unjust, and many wretched ones just, and that doing injustice is profitable if one gets away with it, but justice is someone else's good and one's own loss. We'll forbid them to say such things and order them to sing and tell tales about the opposites of these things. (*Republic*, 392c)

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<sup>68</sup> For a complete listing of the traditional historical sources for Shakespeare's plays, see: Muir, K (1977) *The Sources of Shakespeare Plays*. London, Methuen Publishing. Or also: <http://www.shakespeare-w.com/english/shakespeare/source.html>

Socrates suggests to his interlocutors, and us, that by applying the opposite principles to his critiques we will get an indication of what the speeches for ordinary mortals should look like. The new poetry can therefore give dramatic rise to various villainies and wretched actions of the unjust in so far as it is also shown that there is a natural relationship between such men and their own unhappiness. Poetry need give eloquence to the natural consequences of various states of men's' souls. Whatever this natural order is to look like, it must be able to indicate a certain internal, or psychological, narrative so as to not only make arguments for 'seeming' justice, but an actual internal order. Justice must be shown to be good not only for the individual soul, but as a necessary component for the happiness of the city and political cooperation as such. The new poet is to be good not only for the individual but for the community. The new poetry includes not only a new framework for the presentation of the gods, but also man. Man must be created anew.

### **Part 5: On Theory**

Of the discussion in the *Republic* centred on the issue of style, Bloom claims that what is needed most is a form of poetry to "make what is not truly highest appear to be highest" and that this form can only be the Platonic dialogue itself.<sup>69</sup> If this is so, what is it that the Platonic dialogue tells us is highest but really is not? Does Bloom mean that because the *Republic* praises the philosopher-king so vociferously that the truly highest is actually to be found in the character of Thrasymachus? While it is true that the dialogues feature a number of Thrasymachean-like characters (ex: Calicles and Alcibiades), are we

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<sup>69</sup> Republic, p.360 (Bloom essay)

really to infer that Plato means to point to these characters as the true embodiment of his wisdom? Are these the true purveyors of the just regime? Bloom is perfectly right to note here that “spiritedness is a most problematic element of the soul” and that this points to the perfectly just city’s improbability, but does Plato really mean for his most gifted readers to identify spiritedness as the most unchangeable, and hence highest form of being?

I do not see how a reading of the Platonic dialogues as a whole can consistently maintain this position, nor do I think any reading at all of Socrates’ critique of poetry leads us to this conclusion. It is absolutely true that spiritedness of the guardians becomes the problem *par excellence* for the just regime, and perhaps for all regimes, but the answer Socrates point to in response to this problem is a genuine reform of *poetry*. Bloom wants us to see the reform of poetics as having a merely salutary effect on the guardian class, but what if the effect was not salutary but genuine? What if poetry could direct spiritedness such that it allied itself with a kind of loyal national character? The fact that Bloom cites Shakespeare so approvingly here is strange if his effect on the spiritedness of England’s guardians was merely salutary. To cite Shakespeare approvingly we would have to say his plays and sonnets are just like Platonic dialogues, a claim that severely undercuts the power of their *poetic* quality. What if a poet could make men loyal both to justice and to their own regime? If the regime deviates from the just or the good could not its most spirited members appeal to a restoration of the principles of that regime, as a loyal and enthusiastic member?<sup>70</sup> If Bloom is right that the

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<sup>70</sup> By this I mean to suggest a poetic idealization of something like Burkean style conservatism, or the triumph of reform over revolution. Burke talks frequently of the “spirit of rational liberty” and for him, return is based on constitutional principles:

*Republic* makes what is not truly highest appear to be highest, a much more tenable position would be to say that poetry's ability to influence spirited men in a way that philosophy cannot opens the possibility of its superiority to philosophy in the ancient quarrel.

Another way to approach the question would be to ask, 'what does Socrates present as lowest' in the *Republic*? The answer, in terms of art, is surely imitative poetry. It is telling that Socrates begins his condemnation of imitation by referring to the "first things" in the *Iliad*, "where the poet tells of Chryses' begging Agamemnon to ransom his daughter." ( *Republic*, 392e-393a ) Twelve lines before this, however, we are told it is the Muses who are narrating the tale, and not the poet.<sup>71</sup> This suggests, in a way, a scepticism regarding the claims of the ancient poets in relation to the inspiration of their work. If Homer is genuinely inspired by the Muses, or if any poetry can claim supernatural revelation as its origin, this poses a serious problem for Socrates' rejection of imitative poetry because the depiction of the true god he desires could very easily be said to inspire a diverse range of political poetry. Just as Socrates has shown himself to be extremely suspicious of, if not outright denying the truth of Hesiod and Homer's tales about the gods, he also implies the impossibility of the poets possessing genuine revelation when the result does not match up with his philosophic model. In Socrates'

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"Those who cultivate the memory of our Revolution and those who are attached to the constitution of this kingdom will take good care how they are involved with persons who, under the pretext of zeal toward the Revolution and constitution, too frequently wander from their true principles and are ready on every occasion to depart from the firm but cautious and deliberate spirit which produced the one, and which presides in the other."

Burke, E. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. 1790. McMaster Online Library <http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/burke/revfrance.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> Homer. (1924) *The Iliad*. (A.T. Murray, trans) Cambridge, Harvard University Press. Section 1-8

eyes, the new poetry must not claim to be divinely inspired because it possesses the ability to trump the philosophic model he seeks to impose on poetics itself.

Imitation is condemned because it breaks the earlier established rule that perfect justice arises when one man concerns himself with only one task. (Republic, 394c) Imitators necessarily proclaim themselves as knowledgeable about the ways of warriors, craftsmen, politicians, poets and so on, and therefore either break the rule or do not imitate truthfully. The way around the problem of imitation is for Socrates predicated on a promotion of a narrative style, and he gives us a substantial example of how he would rewrite Homer according to this simple narrative. Simple narration proceeds entirely in the first person voice of the poet himself, and never disguises his own voice through other characters or gods. The narration we are given by Socrates is interesting in that it seems to defy itself because of its appearance in an imitative Platonic dialogue, and also because it is exceedingly boring. We must not, however, discard the argument simply because it appears in a Platonic dialogue. Whatever the merits of disbelieving Socrates based on the ‘argument according to irony’, it runs the risk of overlooking the very real criticisms Socrates poses to imitative poetry.

Socrates finishes his substantial narration by mundanely describing a priest calling on divine retribution for “payment of his tears” and all Adeimantus says in response is, “I understand.” (Republic, 393c-394c) It is clear not only that such narrative ‘poetry’ is not in the least entertaining, but also that it is meant to appeal only to the rational part of the soul. The sample narration by Socrates is remarkable in that it includes many references to the priest appealing to Apollo and the gods, but Socrates says nothing about the receipt of such prayers, nor whether the gods actually respond to the

requests for reprisal. The gods are mentioned, but say and do nothing. The narrative is concerned with the supernatural, but cannot claim to be divinely inspired. We would call it, in the modern sense, realistic literature.

The case for a realistic narrative rests on the inability of comedy and tragedy to cater to the pedagogical needs of the guardian class. The Socratic claim for the superiority of a realistic narrative is set against an imitative poetry that sets out to make a seemingly impossible claim, that one man may be good at imitating many things while also pursuing “noteworthy activities”. The problem with imitation is that it distracts from necessity. This is why Socrates is concerned above all else with guardian poets. In order to focus on other noteworthy activities, namely the practice of being “craftsmen of the city’s freedom”, guardians must restrict themselves wholly to this realistic narrative. Because Socrates says nothing regarding the effect of imitative poetry on non-guardians, there is a certain space in which it could come to play an important role for the many. We are given a clue in this direction when Socrates claims that evidence for the defective nature of imitation can be found in the fact that the same men aren’t capable of producing both good tragedy and comedy. (Republic, 395b) But what if they were? Such a comment is meant, I think, to direct us to the *Symposium* where just such an issue is taken up.

## **Part 6: Comedy and Tragedy**

In the *Symposium*, we are privy to an overnight conversation honouring and praising love. As the dialogue progresses, we see Socrates take a particular interest in correcting the speech of Agathon, a popular tragic poet of the time. Socrates' speech, in turn, draws the ire of Aristophanes, the famous comic poet who mocks philosophy in *The*

*Clouds*. We are meant to notice that the antagonism between philosophy and poetry is quite out in the open and that the two are quite willing to interact with one another in a civil way. Socrates is particularly concerned with the teachings of the city's poets because he sees a connection between the operation of the regime and their accounts of the nature of love, justice, and the happy life. Agathon's speech is disregarded for its inattention to the good and an over reliance on empty rhetoric, while Socrates says little in condemnation of Aristophanes except to say that worship need be directed towards love of the good, and not simply love as such.<sup>72</sup> By the end of the dialogue, Socrates and Aristophanes are the only two guests left awake and Plato indicates they were intently discussing the issue of the best kind of poet. Socrates contention here is that the best kind of poet is not simply comic or tragic, but would necessarily be a synthesis of the two. The true poet must possess an understanding of tragic poetry's ability to promote man's honourable virtues within society without succumbing to the Homeric/Sophistic tendency for producing a kind of fated existentialism.<sup>73</sup> As with Aristophanes, the comic poet's ability to satirize pretenders to knowledge has the effect of strengthening traditional morality without recourse to metaphysical certainty or divine intervention.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Symposium 205e – 'Diotima' seems to have known Aristophanes story and departs from it only to say the love must also be of the good, and not simply its physical character.

<sup>73</sup> Consider that Oedipus seems to be entirely at the whim of the gods, whereas someone like Macbeth interacts with demonic spirits of his own free will and is not simply "fated" to kill a king. See: Newell, W. (2002) *Ruling Passion: The Erotics of Statecraft in Platonic Political Philosophy*. Toronto, Rowan and Littlefield. Ch.2

<sup>74</sup> In Symposium 193-194 Aristophanes summarizes the moral of his tale by claiming men must "keep order" and treat the gods with "all due reverence" by worshipping human love.

We do not, therefore, need to dismiss Socrates' criticisms of poetry simply because Plato himself used imitation. Indeed, Socrates admits the possibility that a genius of Shakespeare's calibre could exist:

Now, as it seems, if a man who is able by wisdom to become every sort of thing and to imitate all things should come to our city, wishing to make a display of himself and his poems, we would fall on our knees before him as a man sacred, wonderful, and pleasing; but we would say that there is no such man among us in the city, nor is it lawful for such a man to be born there. We would send him to another city, with myrrh poured over his head and crowned with wool, while we ourselves would use a more austere and less pleasing poet. (*Republic*, 398a-b)

Socrates therefore admits not only the possibility of a Shakespeare existing, but that his imitative art would be truly great and sacred. The problem with this kind of poet is that within the confines of the perfectly just city in speech, there is always the lingering problem of the corruption of the guardians. Socrates insists guardians must not be enticed to imitate anything other than those heroes who are "courageous, moderate, holy, free, and everything of the sort." (*Republic*, 395c) Outside the city in speech, this poet would be lauded and revered, but inside its walls the appeal of the poet might be strong enough to lure guardians into a state of less than perfect austerity. Socrates fears the power of poetry will corrupt the guardians unless it can be done "in play." (*Republic*, 396e) What Socrates means here by 'in play' is not immediately evident, but he seems to allow for the possibility that a certain kind of self-aware fiction could present vice in a manner that would not create a desire in the guardians to imitate, but rather to avoid such wretched states of the soul. The question also remains, as it does throughout the *Republic*, of what this might mean for a healthy relationship between poets and the regime outside of the confines of the city in speech. As the conditions for the actual implementation of the perfectly just regime become more and more improbable as the

*Republic* progresses, where does this leave us as to the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy?

### **Part 7: The Self**

Having “purged” the luxurious city of all elements antithetical to the perfectly just city in speech, Socrates turns again to the issue of poetry in Book X. The return to poetry is spurred on by a candid admission among the group that the most applicable lesson to be gained from the construction of the city in speech is in fact to mirror such a regime within oneself. Barring some “divine chance”, the city in speech will not exist anywhere on earth and so we must look to heaven where a “pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself”. (*Republic*, 592a-b) Socrates follows up the admission that the founding of an actual regime is not the most appreciable teaching of the *Republic* with an astounding claim. He does not say that because the city is improbable that poets should simply be left to imitate what they will, nor does he make ironic hints, or take even one step back from his scathing critique earlier in the night. In refocusing the components of the just regime within one’s own soul, Socrates says that the one aspect of the city they were particularly right about was their reflections on poetry. We were right, he says:

In not admitting at all any part of it that is imitative. For that the imitative, more than anything, must not be admitted looks, in my opinion, even more manifest now that the soul’s forms have each been separated out...all such things seem to maim the thought of those who hear them and do not as a remedy have the knowledge of how they really are. (*Republic*, 595b)

The primary defect of poetry, and more specifically Homer and the tragic poets, is that they do not possess any self-reflection on the impact their own art has on the founding of

regimes both actual and internal. They present cities, men and gods without knowing how their presentation affects the citizens it seeks to entertain.

The problem inherent in the generation of self-conscious poets is the assumption that one would knowingly take up an art that Socrates' demonstrates is necessarily three times removed from the truth of being. Socrates reasons that a god of some kind is responsible for the ideas, the perfect template for all natural and human artifacts, and is thus the image of truth or being. Craftsmen of all kinds partake in the forms derived from the god and thus make things that are "like the being, but is not being." (Republic, 597a) Since no craftsmen can pursue his art without being in some relation to a higher ideal of his craft, he is necessarily at least one step removed from true being, the consequence of which is to say that man can never arrive at the truth in an active capacity. No crafts or speeches can ever capture the true essence of being, man is somehow divorced from divinity and is thus imperfect. Imitation is three times removed from the essence of being because it merely seeks to replicate what other human beings perform in deed. If imitative poets actually knew this truth about their art then they would be "far more serious about the deeds than the imitations and would try to leave many fair deeds behind as memorials of himself". (Republic, 599b) Socrates goes so far as to say he knows imitative poets cannot know the highest truths about being because if they did, they would cease to be poets and instead become doers of the highest deeds. Socrates means to suggest that the logical conclusion of imitative poetry's thrice-removed state precludes the possibility of truly wise poets.

If we suppose, however, that some poet might come along who, being self-reflective, also refuses to relinquish his art, what might such a poet look like? Socrates

suggests that the self-conscious poet would necessarily want to be as close to the truth as possible, and since he would be aware of his own third-degree status he would seek to imitate the nature of things as closely as possible. The highest possible imitation of things, Socrates suggests, would be akin to holding a mirror up to nature, capturing the sun, the heavens, the earth, animals, plants and human beings so that they look, as closely as possible, to what they are without actually *being* those things. (Republic, 596e) The self-conscious poet would have to be aware of his own limitations as an artist. He would have to reflect on the reality of the poetic arts and see that its highest manifestation is but the holding of a mirror up to nature. For Socrates, the self-conscious poet could never laud poetry as the highest possible human pursuit, but would necessarily laud the deeds of actual men as somehow being higher.

And yet, we must wonder, what if the reflection in the poet's mirror did not measure up to the lofty standards of the good Socrates insisted must be readily visible in the makeup of the regime? What if a city's guardians, kings, or even its philosophers, did not cultivate the moderate virtues Socrates desires? In this case, Socrates suggests it might be possible to put aside whether the poet must be a knower of medicine in order to imitate doctors, a knower of metals to be a blacksmith, and so on for the other arts. The philosophical reality of imitative poetry's three-time removal from the truth is not the primary consideration of the art's beauty or utility. Socrates will agree to put aside all other considerations of the defects of imitative poetry if its adherents will answer but one simple question:

Dear Homer, if you are not third from the truth about virtue, a craftsmen of a phantom, just one we defined as an imitator, but are also second and able to recognize what sorts of practices make human beings better or worse in private

and in public, tell us which of the cities was better governed thanks to you... What city gives you credit for having proved a good lawgiver and benefited them?  
(Republic, 599c-e)

Socrates ultimately argues that what the poets say about the “greatest and fairest things... wars and commands of armies and governances of cities, and about the education of a human being” are the most important consideration of his virtue. Socrates suggests that if such a poet were able, through his presentation of the greatest and fairest things to improve a city both in private and in public, he could transcend the limitations of the third order and exist in the second. His mirror up to nature would not simply imitate the very real misdeeds of guardians, kings and citizens, but would also be able to reflect the natural state of these same men, in harmony with nature and their regimes. He will give an account of a kind of education that would at once produce a benefit for the individual soul and the regime.

Socrates introduces Lycurgus of Lacedaemon as an example of the type of lawgiver that improved their cities in this manner. Socrates does not say what great things he did for Sparta, nor does he tell us how they are connected to his discussion of poetry. Interestingly, the ancient accounts of Lycurgus tell of a man who travelled to Crete in order to learn from their excellent laws, and he happened to meet a wise man named Thales. Lycurgus convinced Thales to come with him to Sparta in order to spread his wisdom of the laws, and Thales “passed as a lyric poet, and screened himself behind this art, but in reality he did the work of one of the mightiest lawgivers.” Thales presumably masked himself as a poet because it was the best way in which to affect the souls of the Spartans without seeming to be doing so. Plutarch tells us his poetry exhorted obedience, harmony, and ordered tranquility such that men were softened

towards each other, renounced mutual hatreds and joined together in a common pursuit of what was high and noble.<sup>75</sup> It was therefore Thales the poet who softened the Spartan's souls towards receiving the more formal instruction of the statesman Lycurgus. In this allusion Socrates hints at the fact that good laws are useless without a certain kind of man to believe in their power. A self-conscious poet, like Thales, can use his art in order to tap into the passions of the many and shape their souls such that they can perceive the correctness of laws that promote community, justice, moderation, and courage. Thales' lyrical poetry entertains, but it also instructs. The state of men's souls has a direct correlation with the content of the art it thinks best. Poetry is the art *par excellence* for the creation of a just regime amongst the many.

### **Part 8: The New Poet**

Preventing such intriguing possibilities are the imitative poets of Socrates' time whose psychological depth amounts to displaying human beings volunteering an action or being forced into it, followed by a display of their subsequent pleasure or pain. These choices, Socrates complains, are overwhelmingly the result of human beings of "one mind". (Republic, 603d) Real humans, he thinks, have factions within themselves and fiercely competitive contrary opinions. Man is a divided being. His choices, therefore, rely on doing "battle with himself" in order to sublimate one order of being over another. Complicating this further is the fact that men bear their ills differently in public than in private. Stoic attitudes that are so easily displayed in public are often kept up only for appearances sake, whilst in private men often "utter many things of which he would be

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<sup>75</sup> Plutarch. (1914) *The Parallel Lives: The Life of Lycurgus*. Loeb Classical Library Edition. Section 4.

ashamed if someone were to hear, and will do many things he would not choose to have anyone see him do.” (Republic, 604a-b) Because the entertaining nature of imitative poetry seeks to replicate first and foremost the public deeds of men, it overlooks the vastly complicated realities of man’s divided soul.

In a practical sense, Socrates calls for a commitment from the poets to displaying the inner turmoil of a human being, including the different faces it must display publicly and privately. Socrates asks for something like soliloquies and asides. These poetic forms allow for the transmission of the subjective states of the human being, which Socrates claims always possess a law abiding, rational, and moderate component alongside a lamenting, irrational, irritable and cowardly one. (Republic, 604b-d) The problem with theatre is that it is superior in its reproduction of the irrational disposition because of its intensity and variety of experience. The strength and prudence of a rational and quiet soul is neither easily imitated nor understood. Because imitative poets have to acquire a good reputation for pleasing the many, the poet’s soul is not naturally directed towards the rational part of the soul and thus cannot be counted on to reproduce it faithfully. The demands of the public are such that nobility is not in fashion, and will thus always lose out to the infinite variety of lamentation and wickedness. The poet thus strengthens the passions of the many and severely weakens the rational part of the soul, “the imitative poet produces a bad regime in the soul of each private man by making phantoms that are very far removed from the truth and by gratifying the soul’s foolish part.” (Republic, 605c) Gratification of the foolish element of man’s soul is inimical to producing justice within the individual soul, and thus, the city at large.

The rational part of the soul is what is by nature best in man, but it must be “adequately educated by argument or habit”. Because tragedy has hitherto produced an enjoyment of suffering, it necessarily also habituates one’s own soul to loving suffering in himself. The enlargement of the pitying element of the human soul has the disastrous effect of increasing pity at one’s own misfortunes, severely damaging the ability of a healthy human being to rationally assess a situation and calculate one’s response. For Socrates, an excess of pity does not produce a universal concern for the welfare of others, but rather a debilitating state of lament and nihilistic contentment with one’s own suffering.

In a most interesting passage, Socrates also claims comic poetry opens itself up to the same kinds of problems as tragedy does with pity. The entire passage is worth reproducing here because of its complexity and the rarity with which Socrates discusses comedy:

Doesn’t the same argument also apply to the laughing part? If there are any jokes that you would be ashamed to make yourself, but that you enjoy very much hearing in comic imitation or in private, and you don’t hate them as bad, you do the same as with things that evoke pity. For that in you which, wanting to make jokes, you then held down by argument, afraid of the reputation of buffoonery, you now release, and, having made it lusty there, have unawares been carried away in your own things so that you become a comic poet. (Republic, 606c)

The first part of Socrates’ argument runs parallel to the argument on tragedy. Since comic poetry induces men to feel comfortable revelling in and telling jokes they would not ordinarily say in public, it therefore induces an excess of frivolity and crassness into the individual soul that is not otherwise present. But then Socrates goes on to say that there is a conscious element in human beings that ordinarily prevents this from

happening, which is the fear of being shamed or thought a buffoon amongst one's peers. The prohibition Socrates calls for is therefore on the imitation of buffoonery and not on comedy as such. The problem is really one of baseness; if one begins imitating comedy that is base in origin, it will unleash the foolishness in your soul that can potentially dissolve the rational element altogether. If, however, comic poetry were to display art of a noble order, or if those exemplars of the comic way of life were of such high sort that one could not truly imitate their genius in wit, perhaps this would be amenable to the new poetics. The second clause suggests also that if one were self-conscious in their adoption of comedy, this might not entail the dissolution of the rational in favour of the foolish. The new poet, if he were to use comedy, would do so not to trumpet frivolity of the buffoon, but rather to compliment whatever larger meaning the poet intended to express.

This reading of the Socratic view of comedy, aside from its uniqueness, can be further substantiated by the synthesis of comedy and tragedy called for in the *Symposium*. Such a synthesis necessarily requires an artist whose self-awareness creates dialogue in verse as to the nature of comedy and tragedy as such. Indeed, of all the Socratic critiques of poetry, the issue of self-awareness is absolutely crucial. As in the analogy of the cave, Socratic truth is not stumbled upon or given as a divine gift, it must be sought after with diligence and courage. The familiar poetic recourse to "inspiration" means that Socrates cannot trust the self-awareness of the poets. The conversation recalls the *Phaedrus* where, in addition to the indictment against poetry on the grounds of its irrationality and penchant for producing passionate convictions in its audience, poetry also proceeds on exceedingly tenuous grounds of frenzy, madness and divine inspiration.<sup>76</sup> What Socrates

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<sup>76</sup> *Phaedrus* 228b, 234d, 277

will also do, however, is begin mounting something of a defence for a kind of divine inspiration, channelled through the muses, that educates the public through the exhortation of the valour of ancient men.<sup>77</sup> Socrates distinguishes this kind of inspiration from those of the prophetic and religious variety seemingly because he believes prophetic inspiration to be an unconscious activity, while the muses, like his daimon, work in tandem with genuine human rationality.

The implication here is that the truly good poet must rationally understand the content and meaning of his work. The divine element of ‘good’ inspiration is the extent to which it educates men in excellence. If Socrates is to remain consistent in his semi-approval of the muses, it stands to reason that such muses, like his daimon, must be internal in nature. The muses are not external demi-gods, imputing man with supernatural wisdom, but rather a poetic account of the internal process of human creativity. The absolute reliance on rationality is ever so loosened, but never dissolved.

## **Part 9: The Ancient Quarrel and the Soul**

Only now, once Socrates has hinted at the possibility of the self-aware poet and the possibility of reconciliation between inspiration and rationality does Socrates mention the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. (Republic, 607b) Socrates hopes that he will be pardoned for any harshness he displayed towards poetry because, as he puts it, poetry struck first. The sources of the quotes Socrates gives of the poets condemning philosophy are curiously all lost to us. The accusations are nevertheless colourful, like the “yelping bitch shrieking at her master”, which could refer to an over-reliance on

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid 244c-245a

rationality or perhaps the Socratic tendency to criticize the political elite. At any rate, each of the accusations Socrates presents poetry making against philosophy are essentially identical to those that he himself lays against the sophists. We can indeed imagine Socrates referring to the sophists' "empty eloquence", and as "refined thinkers who are really poor". (Republic, 607c) Just as Socrates admits in the Gorgias that there may be a way to redirect the sophists' reliance on rhetoric into a philosophically refined art, he also allows that poetry may be similarly reclaimed.

The reclamation of poetry is not, as it was earlier, the simple parroting of events or first person narration, but rather the poetry of "pleasure and imitation". Socrates exiles the poets, yes, but if they were to produce an argument that could show that imitation can belong in a city with good laws then they must be welcomed back because "we ourselves are charmed by them." (Republic, 607d) This line is crucial in that it confirms that poetry has the ability to charm even the master-stoic Socrates, but it also opens the possibility that Plato himself considered the effect of his image-making akin to the charm produced by the poets. Poetry may not only be welcomed back into the city, it may be absolutely necessary to its survival. Poetry may make its just and triumphant return when it has made an "apology" against the very accusations Socrates levels against it. Poetry is therefore in need of its own defence, akin to that given in Plato's own *Apology*. The poetic apology will be given not only by poets, but also by lovers of poetry who wish to speak on its behalf. Poetry requires the emergence of a genius on the level of a Plato, and scholars dedicated to explicating the arguments therein.

The task Socrates sets out for the rehabilitation of poetry into the regime is twofold: there must be an apology in both poetry and prose that can demonstrate why

imitation is not only pleasant, but also beneficial “to regimes and human life”. Such poetry must be life affirming and promote the honourable virtues of citizens, rulers, philosophers and poets alike. It must understand the varieties of human existence and not only move us to feel its power, but also self-consciously demonstrate why poetry itself has an important role to play. In short, it must use its charm in the same kind of pedagogically self-aware manner as political philosophy. All the interlocutors agree they would “undeniably gain” if poets and prose writers could achieve this feat. Until then, poetry in existing cities must only be taken as a playful thing, for if man is serious about the regime inside himself he will not pay any attention to poetry until it has persuaded the philosophers themselves as to its utility. Unlike the demos in the *Apology*, the jury will be made up of those educated in the philosophic art. This new poetry would seem to require a means by which it could simultaneously appeal to the few and the many, much like political philosophy itself. This new poetry needs an account of the soul.

Socrates’ desire for an apology of poetry is followed by his most poetic account of the immortality of the soul. Attempting to prove the indestructibility of the soul, Socrates refers to “all the things we were just going through – injustice, licentiousness, cowardice, and lack of learning”. (*Republic*, 609c) In making explicit reference to the frequent vices of imitative poetry, Socrates invites us to see that the character of defective art, however much it puts vice and corruption on display, cannot ever destroy the essence of the soul itself. No amount of injustice can destroy the soul, no matter how terrible, and so the longstanding view that death will offer wretched souls the release from their suffering is incorrect. Socrates connects this demonstration with the second beginning of the *Republic* itself where Glaucon wishes to hear justice praised in and of itself, with all

reward and reputation removed from the argument. Socrates claims since he has shown that justice is preferable in and of itself that he now be permitted to:

give back to justice and the rest of virtue the wages-in their quantity and in their quality-that they procure for the soul from human beings and gods, both while the human being is still alive and when he is dead...(Republic, 612c)

In other words, having demonstrated the superiority of justice through his dialectic, Socrates now wishes to flourish the philosophic account with a poetic one. Socrates follows his suggestion as to the possibility of a rehabilitation of poetry by insisting there exists such a thing as the human soul, immortal and indestructible, whose rewards for virtue and punishments for injustice survive the death of the human body. Plato ends the *Republic* having Socrates loosen the reigns of the purely rational and engage in a story *a la* “Once upon a time”. (Republic, 614b)

Without exploring the minutiae of the myth, we importantly see Socrates cap off his argument regarding the immortality of the soul with a poetic rendering of the desserts of justice. The rational life is exalted above all others because it prepares the soul for the continuation of prudent decision making in the afterlife. Those accustomed to lamentation, irritability, and a love of money, likewise, will have moulded their souls such that they continue to choose lives of extravagant emptiness in the next world. For the worst of the unjust, the afterlife will see them stripped of their skin, bound, dragged and thrown into Tartarus until they suffer ten times the punishment they inflicted on others. (Republic, 615-616a) Socrates refers, again and again to the “fear” these wicked men will experience. The intended effect of Er’s transmission of this suffering to the people of the city is an increase in their own fears about this undiscovered country. The

just life may be chosen on its own merits, independent of its rewards in death, but the consequences of such a choice become truly stark once Socrates demonstrates such a choice is indispensable to human happiness.

The character of Er is interesting in that he died on the battlefield, ascended to the afterlife to receive his vision, and was resurrected on the twelfth day. Presumably, Er relays his story on the *twelfth night*. Er's vision relays the chief forms of injustice as belonging to his way of life. Being the cause of death of many men and betraying one's city or army are amongst the worst forms of injustice mentioned, as is reducing other men to slavery. It seems appropriate that the poetic account of the afterlife Socrates gives us is chiefly concerned with the same problem he confronts in the beginning of his critique of poetry; the problem of excess *thumos* and the guardians is never far from Socrates' mind. Military unrest, betrayal, and tyranny become the chief concern of the Myth of Er. The rewards for virtue are great, and the sufferings for injustice terrible. Socrates seems to sense that guardians may not necessarily be able to uphold the supremacy of the rational mind while simultaneously partaking in the often-irrational viciousness required for excellence in war. If Socrates wants to indicate the necessity of a concern with immortality and the afterlife in a reformed poetry, it also follows that a pre-eminent concern with war as such is also required.

Socrates reveals that the tyrants we see on earth are the result of a choice they consciously made in the afterlife. Men and women mistakenly choose the life of a tyrant partially because they have a severely impaired ability to decide between the best and worst kind of life, but more importantly because they die believing life is primarily the result of chance and the intervention of evil spirits. (Republic, 619a-d) Socrates

compares the choice of the tyrannical life directly with eating one's own children, and in doing so he ends the *Republic* as he began it, connecting Homer and Hesiod's accounts of the gods and the prevalence of chance with the worst kind of life both in heaven and on earth. The new poetics must show that it is human action, and not random chance that accounts for the fortunes of men, just and unjust alike. Just as Socrates curiously takes up the composition of music at the conclusion of his own life, he has his Er conclude by saying that his experience observing the variety of human souls in their pleasure and pain was "pitiable, laughable and wonderful to see." (*Republic*, 620a) The Myth of Er concludes by mentioning precisely the same elements Socrates had only moments earlier complained of in imitative poetry. Socrates demonstrates the way in which tragedy and comedy are to be well used; they are to be combined and synthesized under the guidance of wonder, elsewhere known as the beginning of philosophy.<sup>78</sup> Socrates thus shows the way in which the poet and philosopher, however different their art, can begin from the same foundation.

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<sup>78</sup>Aristotle. (1989) *Aristotle in 23 Volumes: Metaphysics*. (Hugh Tredennick, trans) Cambridge, Harvard University Press. Book 1, 1.982b

## Chapter 3: Shakespeare and the Tripartite Soul

At issue in an interpretive comparison between Shakespeare and Plato is the ultimately irresolvable tension between how they present their ways of thinking. It is not enough to say that Plato is ironic in his condemnation of poetry in the same way that it is not enough to say that Shakespeare is simply a philosophic-poet. Both these statements may be true but the attempt to simply reduce Shakespeare to Plato is in this author's opinion a great error.

I would instead like to claim that the two great thinkers share a similar kind of wisdom about the human soul and its interaction with the city. In making this claim I do not mean to say that Shakespeare and Plato agree as to the highest peak of human existence, but rather that their disagreement in this regard is made possible by a fundamental agreement. That agreement regarding the character, makeup, and proper orientation of the human soul is best explained through an examination that demonstrates the intense kinship between Plato's tripartite division of the soul and Shakespeare's poetic rendering of this account that gives it a more vivid expression than was possible in Plato's dialogues.

Plato's interest in the soul is fascinating in the sense that at least part of his motivation for discussing it so frequently arises from the necessity of disproving the belief Cebes summarizes in the *Phaedo*, "Men find it very hard to believe what you said about the soul. They think that after it has left the body it no longer exists anywhere, but

that it is destroyed and dissolved on the day the man dies.”<sup>79</sup> Cebe’s materialistic atheism is restated by Simmias as the opinion of the majority of men that the soul merely disperses “like breath or smoke”. Plato’s aim was not simply to disrupt the popularity of this view, but to replace it with what he considered a superior common view for the health of man and city. Overcoming the dominance of materialistic atheism required of Plato not only a philosophically stimulating account of the soul, but one that could be popularized and disseminated by a majority of citizens.

We are told about this kind of atheism from Shakespeare, as well. In *Julius Caesar* we hear from Cassius as he looks ahead to the battle of Philippi where he tells Messala of a profound spiritual conversion: "You know that I held Epicurus strong,/ And his opinion; now I change my mind / And partly credit things that do presage.”<sup>80</sup> By demonstrating not only the ways in which Cassius was an affirmed Epicurean, but also the manner in which he begins to convert to the religion of his ancestors, Shakespeare seems to point towards a tendency that exists in even the most ardent of materialists to eventually link their own actions with a grander purpose or meaning in the events of their lives. It is only once Cassius thinks seriously about the possibility he is about to die that he attributes prophecy and the supernatural to the unfolding of the death of the Roman Republic. Epicurus held the view Plato describes regarding the atomistic dispersion of the soul after death, and this is precisely the orientation toward the soul Cassius is eager

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<sup>79</sup> Phaedo 70a-80d

<sup>80</sup> Julius Caesar (5.1.76-78)

to give up as he marches towards death.<sup>81</sup> He wants his death, and the death of Caesar, to *mean* something in heaven as it has on earth.

Cassius' notion of a movement toward belief in the immortality of the soul moves parallel with Brutus' contention that his actions have been insufficient for the defence of Rome. Cassius takes one chastisement after another from Brutus, all the while asserting his manliness, before his resistance eventually collapses and he calls out:

Come, Antony, and young Octavius, come,  
 Revenge yourselves alone on Cassius,  
 For Cassius is aweary of the world;  
 Hated by one he loves...<sup>82</sup>

Materialist or not, Shakespeare points to the all too human propensity for clouded judgement in the face of emotional adversity, in this instance Cassius's bitter heartbreak at the hands of Brutus. Though the two attempt to patch up their relationship for the good of the coming battle, Cassius is obviously crushed. His passionate attachment to Brutus reduced to rubble, he naturally searches for meaning in his despair and comes to believe, at least partly, in the world of the gods. It is in this context that Shakespeare crafts a truly bizarre entrance of a poet into the two warrior's tent. Brutus rips the poet apart, calling him but a "jiggling fool", while Cassius tries much harder to understand him. Cassius can offer no coherent argument for keeping the poet, and so he relents to Brutus' anger and he is taken away. These men and this Rome are not yet ready for a poetic soul to heal their heartache. Cassius may glimpse a world beyond Epicurus, but he dies like an authentic Roman.

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<sup>81</sup> For a more picture on Epicurus and the soul see: Long, A.A. and David Sedley, (1987) *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 volumes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Section 14A6

<sup>82</sup> Julius Caesar 4.3.2080

This example demonstrates how Shakespeare understands important philosophical positions on the existence of the soul alongside the idea that different kinds of people have wildly divergent beliefs about what the soul is and is not. As Socrates argues, however, the argument for the existence of the soul is but a link in the chain toward the larger picture of constituting the rational, passionate, and appetitive parts of the soul. Existence is a necessary but insufficient condition; the soul must also be understood as a tripartite hierarchy that when in working order assures the health of the city and man. Socrates links the dispositions of cities to those of individual souls, wondering whether we, “learn with one, become spirited with another...and desire the pleasures of nourishment and generation and all their kin with a third”. (Republic, 436a-b) As I will demonstrate, Shakespeare understands the alignment of the soul in much the same way, making quite sharp distinctions between the rational, spirited, and appetitive elements of the soul.

For Plato, wisdom is located in that “small part of himself that rules in him and makes... declarations and has within it the knowledge of what is advantageous for each part and for the whole soul”. (Republic, 442c) For clever readers, it should be glaringly obvious the degree to which Shakespeare's characters frequently undergo this kind of internal conflict and rule. In fact, it might be said that this is Shakespeare's most lasting contribution to literature and philosophy, his comprehensive outlines of humanity's internal conflicts set to drama. The conventions of good drama necessitate such internal conflicts should not destroy the internal coherency of the plot, however close *Hamlet* may be said to have come to this fault. Shakespeare's characters, therefore, for all their struggles, are often shown to possess an ultimately dominant characteristic, but this does

not mean that all other traits are ever shown to be completely wanting. On the contrary, Shakespeare's characters possess such internal richness that we often see the predominance of one trait over another as the impetus for tragic consequences publicly and privately.

We see the tragedy inherent in a predominantly appetitive soul most eloquently in the character of Falstaff. Falstaff succeeds, as many have noted, by exceeding all others in wit and the creative imagination of his language, matched in this regard only by Hamlet.<sup>83</sup> He is a larger than life personification of the will to live, a kind of merry man whose exterior form is unconcerned with the niceties and conventions of 'civilized' human society. Falstaff is rather like the imaginary leader of Socrates' 'city of sows'; who better to lead the purely bodily city than its most unabashedly hedonistic supporter?

In the *Republic*, Socrates relates the appetitive soul specifically to a kind of thirst for drink, "Therefore, the soul of the man who's thirsty, insofar as it thirsts, wishes nothing other than to drink, and strives for this and is impelled toward it." The part of the soul that loves to satisfy the appetites of drink, food, and sex, Socrates calls the "irrational and desiring, companion of certain replenishments and desires." (*Republic*, 439b-d) Indeed, we see in the beginning of *Henry IV*, in Hal's very first speech, the satisfaction of precisely this Socratic description as Falstaff asks for the time of day:

Thou art so fat-witted, with drinking of old sack  
and unbuttoning thee after supper and sleeping upon  
benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to  
demand that truly which thou wouldst truly know.  
What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the

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<sup>83</sup> Bloom, H. (1995) *Shakespeare and the Value of Personality: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. Princeton University. P.160  
[http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/b/bloom97.pdf](http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/b/bloom97.pdf)

day? Unless hours were cups of sack and minutes  
 capons and clocks the tongues of bawds and dials the  
 signs of leaping-houses and the blessed sun himself  
 a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no  
 reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand  
 the time of the day.<sup>84</sup>

The references to Falstaff's love of alcohol, gluttony, public sleep, "tongues of bawds" and a "fair hot wench" are all indications of his absolute reliance on the appetitive part of his soul. The joke of this and subsequent passages lies in Hal's jesting bewilderment at Falstaff's concern with the "time of the day", a purely rational concern, considering his day to day actions give no concern whatsoever for that part of his soul. Falstaff drinks, sleeps, and has sex regardless of the time of day - a condemnation Falstaff takes so well that he urges Hal not forget that he is also a thief!

That Falstaff utilizes such high-level rhetoric in no way debases the appetitive thesis. (Republic, 440a) As Socrates makes clear, the three parts of the soul are in constant disagreement with one another as to which should lead, it depends on the character of the individual as to which takes control. For Shakespeare, his unparalleled examination of internal conflict lends itself perfectly to this particular Socratic thesis. In Falstaff's case, it is clear that his rhetorical genius is enslaved to the power of his appetite:

Marry, then, sweet wag, when thou art king, let not  
 us that are squires of the night's body be called  
 thieves of the day's beauty: let us be Diana's  
 foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the  
 moon; and let men say we be men of good government..

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<sup>84</sup>Henry IV 1, 1.2

Falstaff perverts the nature of thievery in order to make a reasoned argument regarding his place in the young prince's future kingdom. He wants a life of irresponsibility, but knows that he must at least attempt to act responsibly in order to attain it. By good government, Falstaff means soundness of leadership, his leadership, which transfigured into the polis means the dominance of the body over passionate longings for honour or traditionally rational laws. While it is clear Hal, and eventually Henry V, quite clearly understands Falstaff's attempt at responsibility, his wisdom allows him to see it is always another master that it serves.

In a sense Falstaff's longings here, and in his famous questioning of honour, constitute the sublimation of rationality to appetite only in so far as the Platonic desire for the leadership of rationality is thought to be true. When Falstaff cries out "give me life" he is not, strictly speaking, irrational. He has rather another notion of rationality altogether, that the pleasures of the body and appetites of the flesh are the only means by which our happiness is assured. Falstaff exists in a way that he can poke holes in the Platonic hierarchy of the soul, but only if we see Falstaff as unqualifiedly right about life, only if we see him as the virtuous figure of the *Henriad*. Although Epicureans or modern materialists may hold this to be true, I do not think any good argument could be put forward that Shakespeare thought this to be so. That he crafted the *Merry Wives of Windsor* so concretely contra-Falstaff points obviously in this direction, although the heartache of exclusion from the reconstituted kingdom of Henry V should be evidence enough.

We see the dominance of the appetite soul also in *Timon of Athens*, which we will return to more completely in Chapter 6. During Timon's banquet, we see repeated claims

about the virtue of friendship being tied to the sharing of food and wine. We even see the feast tied to two bizarre prayers by Apemantus and Timon, the result of which draws a sharp distinction between the Biblical understanding of friendship in the “breaking of the bread”, and the complete lack of true virtue and friendship in the play itself.<sup>85</sup> The philosopher Apemantus, although no model of virtue himself, realizes the depravity of the dominating appetitive spirit and bemoans:

O you gods, what a number of  
men eat Timon, and he sees 'em not! It grieves me  
to see so many dip their meat in one man's blood;  
and all the madness is, he cheers them up too.<sup>86</sup>

Timon and his unnamed lords respond, in kind, by passing the wine around the table and engaging in more bouts of self-congratulation and hedonism. It is clear Shakespeare means to show the dangers of a dominant appetitive soul, the inability to demonstrate self-knowledge, and a willingness to engage in self-deception.<sup>87</sup>

In *The Tempest*, Caliban is another excellent Shakespearean depiction of the appetitive soul, made particularly clear because Prospero, the rational master, and Ariel, the spirited elemental warrior, surround him. Barbara Tovey is surely right in turning our attention to the fact that “Caliban is a creature of bodily appetites and impulses” and, indeed, “much of his talk throughout the play turns on food”.<sup>88</sup> The beauty of *The Tempest*, though, is the degree to which the characters are not simply manifestations of

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<sup>85</sup> Compare the appetitive references to food and wine in 1.2 of *Timon of Athens* with Matthew 15:36 and Acts 2:42

<sup>86</sup> *Timon of Athens* 1.2.378

<sup>87</sup> This theme is taken up and discussed further in Chapter 6.

<sup>88</sup> Tovey, B. (Sep 1983) Shakespeare’s Apology for Imitative Poetry: The *Tempest* and The Republic Interpretation. *A Journal of Political Philosophy* Volume 11.3 p.275-316.

isolated appetite or spiritedness, but rather that each character is ruled by, and yet rebels against, Prospero's rational mastery. As Knight reminds us, Ariel and Caliban are completely "yoked in the employ of Prospero."<sup>89</sup> Precisely as Plato described, the three components of the soul are in a kind of constant jousting match.

Caliban embodies so many characteristics of the appetitive part of the soul and, like Ariel, dislikes his position in relation to Prospero and the hierarchy of the island. Just as Socrates sees the appetitive portion as the larger and baser division that includes things like food, drink, and sex, one of the first things we learn of Caliban is his attempted rape of Miranda.<sup>90</sup> Socrates consistently mentions restraint and moderation as a means of controlling the appetites, and we see Prospero frequently threatening Caliban with "cramps" and "pinches" at various points throughout the play. Although the rational soul seeks to control the appetite, Prospero and Miranda "cannot miss him", as he performs certain essential chores and menial labour for them.<sup>91</sup> Shakespeare presents in Prospero the dominance of the orderly rational soul, but keeps the play, and us, grounded with the caveat that he, like us, cannot wholly escape from his baser needs.

Plato describes the education of the auxiliaries as a process of allowing them to internalize the laws of the city much like prepared wool holds its colour once dyed.<sup>92</sup> The steadfast potential of the spirited soul that wills, desires, and emotes makes possible the virtues of courage and honour which Shakespeare shows himself to be particularly

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<sup>89</sup> G. Wilson Knight. (1947) *The Crown of Life*. London, Oxford University Press. P.137

<sup>90</sup> *Tempest* (I.ii.347-8)

<sup>91</sup> *Tempest* 1.2.311

<sup>92</sup> *Republic* 429e

concerned with.<sup>93</sup> A virtue like courage interacts with reason “when [the spirited part] preserves through pains and pleasures the declarations of reason about what is to be feared and what isn’t”.<sup>94</sup> The military virtues arising from the spirited portion of the soul are sufficiently resolute only when it obeys the properly ordered rational component.

In *Henry IV*, we are privy to the unfolding of the potential for courage and honour to act as the twin pillars of good governance in a time of war. Hal, so full of careful wit and without doubt never completely withdrawn from civil affairs, prepares the stage for a glorious reversal of reputation as he is called on to assist his father in defeating the rebel Hotspur:

In both your armies there is many a soul  
 Shall pay full dearly for this encounter,  
 If once they join in trial. Tell your nephew,  
 The Prince of Wales doth join with all the world  
 In praise of Henry Percy: by my hopes,  
 This present enterprise set off his head,  
 I do not think a braver gentleman,  
 More active-valiant or more valiant-young,  
 More daring or more bold, is now alive  
 To grace this latter age with noble deeds.  
 For my part, I may speak it to my shame,  
 I have a truant been to chivalry;  
 And so I hear he doth account me too;  
 Yet this before my father's majesty--  
 I am content that he shall take the odds  
 Of his great name and estimation,

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<sup>93</sup> See for ex: Alvis, J. (1990) *Shakespeare's Understanding of Honor*. Carolina Academic Press. This book has a remarkable amount to say about Shakespeare's understanding of the nation-building consequences, as well as pitfalls, of the notion of honour. Curiously, although it dedicates an entire chapter to the Henry plays, it does not mention Falstaff or his catechism on honour whatsoever.

<sup>94</sup>Republic 442c

And will, to save the blood on either side,  
Try fortune with him in a single fight.<sup>95</sup>

When the spirited part of the soul leads according to rational direction, we see that a kind of steadfast ferocity can occur alongside a respect for honour – a kind of virtue often referred to as the chivalric code. Hal compliments, respects, and is in many ways in the shadow of Henry ‘Hotspur’ Percy, and so by esteeming him greatly he allows for the possibility of his own procurement of great reputation and honour in victory. We suspect Hal has acquired his powerful potential for rhetoric at least in part from his friend Falstaff, but his rhetoric, however grandiose, is always attached as much to the betterment of the country as it is his own reputation. In desiring to challenge Hotspur one on one, Hal knows he may perish. But if he lives, Britain will thrive. The spirit leads, and in turn is lead.

The capacity for the individual parts of the soul to work in unison and in accordance with the moderate direction of reason are for both Shakespeare and Plato the basis upon which good political action is made possible. We see it clearly in the phoenix-like transformation of Prince Hal into Henry V, and its counterpoint very clearly in the character of Falstaff. We know from Shakespeare’s reading of the *Phaedo* that he purposely constructed parallels between Falstaff and Socrates, although for Shakespeare the purpose of such parallels seems to be a desire for parody.<sup>96</sup> Falstaff possesses all the brilliance of the Socratic wit, but is utterly unconcerned about connecting his use of irony with a larger pedagogical purpose. Where Socrates drinks and never appears inebriated,

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<sup>95</sup>Henry V v.1.2706

<sup>96</sup> Please refer to Chapter 6 for a more complete picture of this link.

Falstaff drinks and never appears entirely sober. Socrates refuses to engage in political life while Falstaff haphazardly desires it most of all.

Falstaff embodies the dangers inherent in the kinship of reason and appetite. His desire for political rule appears to revolve entirely around escaping the consequences of his crimes while appearing powerful to his friends and satiating his growing appetite for wine and sex. His reason is defective not in its brilliance, but in its belief that spiritedness is incompatible with the good life. He approaches the heights of modern philosophy in his complete dismissal of the value of honour. Falstaff poses, as Hobbes did, a great challenge to the Platonic-Aristotelian formulation of noble politics.

Being told he “owest God a death”, Falstaff replies:

'Tis not due yet; I would be loath to pay him before his day. What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me? Well, 'tis no matter; honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? how then? Can honour set to a leg? no: or an arm? no: or take away the grief of a wound? no. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? no. What is honour? a word. What is in that word honour? what is that honour? air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? he that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? no. Doth he hear it? no. 'Tis insensible, then. Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? no. Why? detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon: and so ends my catechism.<sup>97</sup>

In subtle fashion, Shakespeare links Falstaff's latent atheism with the beginning of a line of questioning that ends in the complete dismissal of honour as a worthy political

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<sup>97</sup>Henry IV 1 (v.1.end)

principle. Falstaff thinks he knows better than Hal regarding divine things, he does not think it God's day to receive him, nor does he think God calls on him *at all*. Falstaff uses the creative power of reason to begin the process of undermining the authority of medieval political hierarchy and God, including the chivalric values that proceed from them.

In addition to trying to convince us of the absurdity of spirited pursuits, Falstaff seems to be trying to bypass the feudal custom that an act of sacrifice be made for the king. He is looking for a loophole in the hierarchic and philosophic structure of society wherein he can dodge his debts and duties to God and country. What Falstaff ends up doing, however, is questioning the necessity of doing any duty and of paying *any* debt. Shakespeare shows that whatever we think of avoiding this *particular* duty, Falstaff's unhinged form of reasoning holds the power to relinquish duty as such. Through the power of reason he seeks a way to remain completely obedient to his appetite alone.<sup>98</sup> The ethical vision his speech conjures can be described as one of utter amorality, selfishness, and total lack of responsibility. His 'shield' against the death that the spirited life demands is the alignment of reason with the primary requirement of appetite, life itself.<sup>99</sup> While it is impossible to deny his lucid insights into the violence and destruction the pursuit of chivalric honour entails, Shakespeare ensures Falstaff's crushing disappointment at ultimately being excluded from rule is made in this light to look perfectly just. Shakespeare holds a certain sympathy for Falstaff's roguish wit, but the ascent of Henry V makes quite clear Shakespeare's disagreement with Falstaff over the worthiness and utility of honour.

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<sup>98</sup> See for example: "O, I do not like that paying back, 'tis double labour" 3.3 149.

<sup>99n</sup> Cutcheon refers to the ceremonial covering over a coffin as well as a 'shield'.

There is a certain sense in which Falstaff's catechism on honour would be widely accepted today. In a way his destruction of the value of honour is a call to peace, a thirst for life.<sup>100</sup> However much some moderns may laud Falstaff for his deconstruction of honour, there is a disturbing sense in which the speech, coupled with Falstaff's actions, demonstrates the absolute need for a respect of the properly aligned spirited soul as Plato and Shakespeare understood it. Falstaff's call to peace and life accompanies the destruction of valour, it elevates the appetite through the rational mind at the expense of the spirit. Shakespeare demonstrates how the spirited part of the soul is unique in that we may openly speak of its decline or death, while it would be absurd to claim that man's appetitive nature is withering away, or that reason no longer holds sway amongst the merry few. And yet, for the life of the spirit, we see how Falstaff's union of appetite and reason poses a unique philosophic threat to the spirited soul. Mercifully, King Henry will have nothing to do with this sort of investigation, and for this reason he has rightly been called Shakespeare's presentation of the perfect king. Flawed as a human, to be sure, but balanced.

As Plato attests, however, even the best possible rulers cannot ensure their regime remains unchanged forever, "since for everything that has come into being there is decay, not even a composition such as this will remain for all time; it will be dissolved. And this will be its dissolution".<sup>101</sup> The dissolution Socrates describes begins with the human inclination for "calculation aided by sensation", or, a kind of Falstaffian reasoning at the behest of the appetite, which results in the creation of offspring that are corrupted or

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<sup>100</sup> "I like not such grinning honour as Sir Walter Blunt hath. Give me life, which if I can save, so. If not, honour comes unlooked for, and there's an end" (5.3. 55-57).

<sup>101</sup> Republic, 545b-546a

easily corruptible. When the rulers' 'gold metal' becomes mixed with too much silver, bronze, or iron, "inharmonious irregularity" will inevitably breed war and hatred.<sup>102</sup>

The solution Socrates suggests to this breeding of hatred between the classes is to "come to an agreement on a middle way" by making specific compromises on property and claims to ruling authority in order to ease political tension in the polis. This tentative compromise leads to the rule of the strictly wise degenerating into the rule of "spirited and simpler" men, which will be more directed to war and honour than peace. The danger of this kind of man is that he bases his title to rule not only on an absence of wisdom, but on total disregard even for political rhetoric. He will base his title only on "warlike deeds and everything connected with war; he is a lover of gymnastic and the hunt."<sup>103</sup> Such a man, Socrates continues, arises from his mother watering the "desiring and spirited parts" of the soul whereby his otherwise good nature is turned to ignorance. In this regard, Shakespeare clearly learned much and drew heavily on Plato and Aristotle. Although the compromise that leads to the eventual awakening of the 'lover of war' fits the description, in various ways, of many of Shakespeare's plays, it comes exceedingly close to the precise plot of *Coriolanus*.

Just as Shakespeare uses his poetry to show the political dangers inherent in the dissolution of the spirited soul, so too does he demonstrate the dangers of its excess in *Coriolanus*. Because a certain historical sense places a particularly strong emphasis on the dangers of the excessively spirited soul, let us then examine *Coriolanus* in some depth. *Coriolanus*, perhaps better than any other play, allows Shakespeare to show the

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<sup>102</sup> Republic, 546c-547a

<sup>103</sup> Republic, 549a

relationship between the desires of different kinds of citizens and the resulting consequences on the city itself. The play demonstrates what a city looks like when the rational element of both the demos and the aristocracy are overrun by spiritedness.

The opening scene of *Coriolanus* is demonstrative of Shakespeare's complicated treatment of the relationship between spirit and the democratic multitude. The play opens upon “mutinous” citizens marching through Rome seemingly on the brink of open rebellion. The citizens' rhetoric demands blood, agreed as they are on the murder of Caius Marcius, soon to be known as Coriolanus, “chief enemy to the people”.<sup>104</sup> The dispute seems centered around what the citizens believe is an artificially low price for their corn. Interestingly, however, what appears at first to be framed as a purely economic dispute is quickly shown to be a call for significant political reform. The citizens demand the blood of a nobleman not to show they are serious about the corn prices, but so they might have “corn at our own price”. What the citizens desire is an increase in their authority over the economic system per say; the multitude demands a larger share in the governance of the Roman state.

The leader of the many, the First Citizen, frames the plot against Marcius primarily because he has an excess of pride that oversteps the bounds of what even he agrees is prominent military virtue.<sup>105</sup> In this way Shakespeare does not present the multitude as though it were simply a possessed mob, for it is not pride the many despise, but pride in excess. His use of the Second Citizen also suggests a nuanced portrait of the many that may in fact be capable of rational discourse. The Second Citizen proceeds

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<sup>104</sup>Coriolanus, 1.1.8

<sup>105</sup>Coriolanus, 1.1.36

contrary to the bloodlust of the multitude by raising questions about the worth of military accomplishments to the wellbeing of the regime as a whole as well as justifying Marcius' abundance of pride as arising from and being necessary to his nature. The Second Citizen suggests, as Plato might, that the auxiliary class necessarily requires a larger portion of spirit than do the others. Coriolanus' pride is not to be opposed in so far as he is necessary to keep the country safe, but in so far as his excess claims a title to rule.

Shakespeare deftly presents a kind of moderating voice within the citizenry as a whole as if to suggest that reasonable political people are not privy to the privileged simply, but are perhaps better heard amongst the few. Indeed, the moderating voice of the Second Citizen is drowned out by the angry rhetoric of the mob, but it is later shown to have a direct parallel with the speech of Menenius, a very rational and moderate gentleman.

That Shakespeare is more interested in showing the tension between the few and the multitude rather than demonstrating the obvious superiority of either is nowhere more apparent than in Menenius' metaphor of the healthy human body. Aristotle, echoing Plato's conception of the city and soul analogy, tells us that the many can achieve a kind of virtue when they realize that "on their joining together, the multitude, with its many feet and hands and having many senses, becomes like a single human being, and so also with respect to character and mind."<sup>106</sup> In Aristotle's presentation, the many achieve the virtue necessary for a stake in ruling through a unity of body that reflects the healthy character of the citizens. As the riotous citizens spot Menenius coming towards them,

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<sup>106</sup>Aristotle. (1984) *The Politics*. (Carnes Lord, trans) Chicago: University Chicago Press. Section 101, 2

both the First and Second citizens are in perfect accord as to his personal virtue and well-meaning disposition towards the commoners. That the most bloodthirsty of the rioters publicly wishes all noblemen were as honest and forthright as Menenius suggests at least the possibility of a peaceful coexistence between the two main constitutive elements of the Roman Republic. The mob is not satisfied by Menenius' honest character alone, but is importantly persuaded by the power of his image-heavy rhetoric.

Shakespeare draws the metaphor of the healthy stomach from Plutarch, and it also certainly resonates with Plato and Aristotle's preoccupation with discussing doctors and physical ailments in comparison to healthy and defective regimes. Menenius first attempts to persuade the mob of the futility of their rebellion by way of comparing the care a father gives to his children with the care the nobility provides to the plebians. (I.I.75) It fails because the First Citizen understands care entirely in terms of direct material gain. They possess no excess of grain, are hampered by debt and receive no favorable treatment from the law, and thus see the governing few as stifling their pursuit of their own self-interest. Menenius realizes his appeal to traditional authority and the superiority of government force has failed to convince the incensed mob and so he offers to tell the multitude a “pretty tale”. The First Citizen responds with genuine curiosity; tales, it seems, can still intrigue the people when appeals to abstraction and authority do not.

Menenius tells the tale of a human body rebelling against its own stomach because whereas the rest of the members “see and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel and mutually participate” it seemed to them that the belly sits inactive, taunting the rest of the body with its complete domination over the body’s nourishment. (I.I.90-115) Menenius

initially crafts the image such that the many can immediately sympathize with the plight of the body against the belly and perhaps even gives a certain credence to their claims. He describes the belly as proceeding with a “kind of smile, which ne’er came from the lungs” and by “tauntingly” replying to the outcries of the body. As we see in the many’s description of Coriolanus, the primary tension between the demos and the nobility is the perception of an overflow of pride, and we certainly sense a kind of disingenuous pandering smile on Coriolanus’ face each time he speaks to the multitude. The many’s perception of this excess seems to be confirmed by Menenius. Ultimately Menenius does succeed, however, in demonstrating to the people that the belly acts virtuously in doling out to each member its necessary nourishment and that only through its healthy functioning does the people receive “that natural competency whereby they live”.

(I.I.138) Menenius does not disregard the claim of excess pride, but rather transforms the many’s view of this vice into the vessel by which “public benefit” proceeds; he argues there are rational ends for excessive spiritedness. Menenius claims here that the public do not make their own benefit precisely because they are preoccupied with seeing, hearing, walking and feeling, whilst the core of the regime concerns itself with the calculation of the good for the whole.

Menenius’ tale, then, is strikingly similar if not a direct allusion to Aristotle’s commentary, the hierarchical components of which align nicely with Plato’s *Republic*. Aristotle stresses the “senses” (or appetites) of the many as being a crucial element to their unity and subsequent stake in governance. Menenius not only describes the multitude as being characterized by their sensual appetites, but uses this knowledge in order to soothe their rage. Menenius’ image of the healthy body/regime succeeds in

calming the passions of the people to such a great extent that the First Citizen greets the entrance of Coriolanus, chief enemy of the people, with deference and respect.<sup>107</sup>

Coriolanus, of course, destroys the goodwill Menenius has attained by insulting the demos and denying any legitimacy whatsoever to their claims:

Who deserves greatness deserves your hate. And your affection's are a sick man's appetite, who desires most that would increase his evil...Trust ye? With every minute you do change a mind, and call him noble that was now your hate, him vile that was your garland. (I.I170-180)

Coriolanus does not disregard the possibility that if the many were virtuous they should have a stake in ruling, but instead claims that they are base creatures because they hate greatness, desire things against their own interest, and frequently change their mind regarding who and what they consider honorable. Coriolanus' argument, in its prideful and insulting tone, denies the multitude a stake in ruling based not on class or tradition, but on their lack of participation in virtue and prudence.

Menenius tries as best he can to temper Coriolanus' rage at the multitude by defending his own ability to persuade them of what is best for the operation of the regime. Indeed, the citizen's ability to back down from their pitchforks and mutinous demands is itself a kind of virtue, but it is a virtue that depends entirely on what Coriolanus considers one of their chief vices. Coriolanus' anger at the quickness by which the many change their mind is in fact the very virtue that prevents revolution. Coriolanus, on the other hand, is so resolute in what he believes to be a virtuous life, ie: the way of the spirited warrior class, that he decries even Menenius' ability to compromise and preserve the regime. Coriolanus claims the decision to grant the

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<sup>107</sup> Coriolanus, 1.1.165

multitude tribunes will in fact lead to them winning more power and in time creating an even greater insurrection.<sup>108</sup> The problem here could not be more complex: as Aristotle points out, to deny the multitude a share in ruling is sure to make them an enemy of the ruling class, but to give them too much is certain to create injustice and errant statesmanship.<sup>109</sup> Menenius' prudent statecraft allows him to mediate the immediate danger to the stability of the regime by rebuking the citizens with sensuous imagery and the compromise of sharing in rule through the mediation of the elected tribunes. In this way, how can we not side with the compromise of Menenius and the multitude? And yet, if we look to the long term health of Rome, is not Coriolanus in some measure absolutely correct that in time the people's growing influence will create an even greater insurrection, ie: the rise of popular tyranny in the form of Caesar and his line?

Shakespeare does not aim to show simply that both sides have competing just claims to authority, but that these claims are ultimately in direct tension with one another and are outcomes of the warring relationships between rationality, spirit, and appetite precisely as we see in Plato. The aristocracy, composed of excellent men, necessarily makes the claim that it need rule based on its superiority, whilst the multitude necessarily makes a claim to rule based on the fact that no one citizen is simply superior to any other. Indeed, Aristotle also tells us it is "not possible" for a regime to be administered finely without paying sufficient attention to two principles, justice and military virtue.<sup>110</sup> Through Menenius' metaphor of the healthy body, we see that the citizens and the nobility are able to compromise sufficiently on the basis of claims to justice. The citizens

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<sup>108</sup>(I.I.200-220)

<sup>109</sup> Aristotle, 101, 25

<sup>110</sup> Aristotle 104, 20

are sufficiently virtuous in their capability of understanding that their own private self-interest is not directly parallel to the good of the regime as a whole, and so the establishment of tribunes secures a certain harmony. As the play progresses, however, we see Shakespeare present Aristotle's second principle as being ultimately unable to hold the tenuous compromise.

Shortly after sharply rebuking the citizen's claims to rule, Coriolanus is called away to war and prominently displays his immensely superior military ability. Indeed, Shakespeare deviates from Plutarch by having Coriolanus single handedly defeat an entire legion of troops at the entrance of the fortress in Corioli. (I.IV.50-70) He is presented as god-like in military virtue, as his fellow soldiers all assume him surely to be slain from such an overwhelming mismatch. Coriolanus is not simply excellent in terms of military virtue, but he is importantly presented here as being superior to the sum of the rest of his troops. What they cannot accomplish as a unit, he accomplishes single handedly. Shakespeare makes this distinction not to over-dramatize the action of the play, but to make perfectly evident the tension that Aristotle saw between great men and the multitude. What is the city to do when there exists one man so outstanding by the excess of his military virtue that the honours he claims for himself supersede those of justice itself?<sup>111</sup>

The problem with Coriolanus becomes apparent as he returns to Rome and, convinced by his mother to run for consul, must be approved by the demos before he officially takes office. Lured into a war of words by the tribunes who fear his entering politics, Coriolanus refuses to temper his pride by showing his war-wounds to the people. The citizen's deliberation prior to speaking with Coriolanus confirms the possibility that

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<sup>111</sup> Aristotle 106, 10

they can reach a tenuous compromise with excellence; they understand that if Coriolanus shows them their wounds (ie: humbles himself before them) then they must make him consul, for “Ingratitude is monstrous: and for the multitude to be ingrateful, were to make a monster of the multitude”. (II.III.1-10) The citizens, then, do possess a deliberative capacity for giving in to what they hate (pride), in return for what they desire (humility). They are citizens that understand what Aristotle means when he says citizenship is both ruling and being ruled in the sense that they understand they must give up some political power in return for the excellence of the nobility’s ability to protect them from physical harm.

Coriolanus, however, cannot temper his excessive pride and thus does not truly partake in citizenship, as he shows himself incapable of being ruled. Coriolanus shows himself to the citizens in a “gown of humility” but refuses to make his character match his appearance once the tribunes convince the multitude that Coriolanus mocked them with insincere praise. (II.III.170) Coriolanus is unable to answer the tribunes questioning as his noble pride takes over and lets loose a vicious assault on Rome’s republican compromise:

In soothing them, we nourish ‘gainst our Senate the cockle of rebellion, insolence, sedition, which we ourselves have ploughed for, sowed, and scattered, by mingling them with us, the honoured number; who lack not virtue, no, nor power, but that which they have given to beggars... Thus we debase the nature of our seats, and make the rabble call our cares fears; which will in time break ope the locks ‘o th’ Senate and bring in the crows to peck the eagles. (III.I.70-140)

With his Nietzschean like-onslaught, Coriolanus is branded a traitor and spared from immediate execution through Menenius’ deft compromise of exile. The citizens act in precisely the manner that Aristotle suggests, in that they are forced to ostracize a man

who appears like a “god among human beings”. (Aristotle 107,10) Indeed, Coriolanus’ chilling last words to the demos echo this theme as he says to the entire city “I banish you”. (III.III.120) Aristotle endorses ostracism as a legitimate mechanism to remedy the defect of excessive pride in these god-like individuals. Shakespeare builds on this understanding by remarking on how much better the city appears in times of peace and the increased difficulties it now faces in times of war. Coriolanus’ exile proves disastrous; since the man-god proves he does not need the city at all, he is free from civic attachments and joins the Volsces in their attempt to destroy Republican Rome. The Romans’ complete inability to defend themselves against a warrior of this magnitude is indicative of democracy’s inherent weakness; the multitude’s hatred of nobility brings with it the danger that men of excellent virtue or superiority in times of great distress will be alienated from the authoritative element of the city, thus exposing it to possible annihilation.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Shakespeare means to say that the multitude’s hatred of excessive pride necessarily leads to its own destruction. However much blame the citizens deserve for making rash judgements and being unable to adequately defend the regime, Coriolanus display of pride in excess suggests a parallel defect from the nobility. We see that Coriolanus is only persuaded not to destroy Rome by the pleading of his wife and especially his mother; this suggests that young Coriolanus was nurtured toward an excess of pride from a very young age. That he was educated to pay attention only to attainment of honour detaches him from the laws and social conventions of the city, precisely as Plato warns in *The Republic*. He cares only to please his mother’s total preoccupation with the attainment of honour, he does not look to the

wellbeing of the regime as a whole. As it is for Plato, spiritedness alone cannot rule. In Menenius, we see the possibility that the nobility, while still looking down upon the multitude, can achieve compromise in order to preserve the wellbeing of the city. That Menenius is presented as a truly rational statesman suggests that Shakespeare sees the pride of the nobility and the unreflective pursuit of self-interest of the multitude as natural elements of democracy and aristocracy as such. Pride and self-interest cannot be rooted out, but they can be moderated. Were either element destroyed, the city would seem to be faced with either its own destruction or severe injustice. Any simple dichotomy between democracy and autocracy will necessarily mislead thinking men into believing that the democratic pursuit of modest self-interest is always and everywhere the best way of life.

In this way, Shakespeare shows that republican government defies modernity's tendency to collapse regimes into a simple democratic/autocratic typology. Considering the legacy the Roman Republic has had on the creation of our own regimes, classical political philosophy's understanding of regime typology cannot simply be discarded by the wayside. Shakespeare demonstrates Aristotle's wisdom that the tension between justice and virtue implies a certain inequality will always be present in healthy political communities, but that these inequalities should not become too great in scope. The larger the gap between what is considered superior and inferior weakens a regime's claim to a unified vision of justice, and thus puts itself in the position of having to alienate potentially beneficial human types on both sides of the spectrum. Shakespeare rebukes those who would say that we must strictly be in favour of either democracy or dictatorship through the character of Menenius. Menenius understands that the tension between the few and the many does not present either side as unanimously superior in

virtue or claims to rule, but rather that only a political understanding of the tension between the constitutive elements of city can a regime ever hope to be kept in good health. Although his attempts to navigate the difficult waters between the prideful few and the self-interested many fail due to the extremities of Coriolanus' character, he does serve as an ample guide for those modern few who show themselves to be not quite so 'god-like'.

We see, therefore, that while neither Falstaff, Timon, Caliban, Hal or Coriolanus fit precisely into any of Plato's descriptions of the perfectly balanced rational soul, Shakespeare has created the conditions whereby the tripartite soul's internal struggle can be played out in the drama of his plays. We see guardians of the ruling class who are moderated by higher reason, and so too do we see them destroyed through slavish attachment to appetite and desire. We see the auxiliaries, both in their ability to utilize the strength of spiritedness towards the protection of the city and the all-too familiar human tendency to embrace it beyond the control of reason. The craftsmen too, the working class, are given the possibility of a kind of noble existence in the rhetoric of Henry and their opposition to the tyranny of Rome, but we are ever-reminded in Shakespeare of the rarity of this condition, and perhaps the impossibility of its perpetuation. The internal struggles of the tripartite soul manifest themselves in the external struggle for recognition, power, and peace throughout the Shakespearean corpus, echoing Plato's wisdom a thousand years after the fact.

## Chapter 4: Shakespeare and Musical Education

Shakespeare, like Plato, understands that music is a key drive for the animating forces of passion and reason within the human soul. Erotic longing and reason itself direct us to our ends like the rising and falling of the chromatic scale, and are equally as susceptible to the shrieking violence of ill-harmony and discord. Who can deny the arousal of spiritedness at the orderly banging of a drum, or the saintly allure of an orchestral sonata or hymn? Music, both sonic and lyrical, are universal both in their physiological effects as well as their metaphorical power. All people, always and everywhere, have been moved to war and peace, both internal and external, by the power of music. How people and societies orient themselves towards the issue of musical education, then, is of the utmost importance for the health of the political community. Although Shakespeare provides directions for variously 'solemn' sounds and music within the plays, the noise of the instruments themselves are ultimately inseparable from the larger meaning of Shakespeare's poetry as such. Music appears as a metaphor frequently throughout his works, utilizing a variety of vivid imagery in describing his characters as being in one way or another in or out of 'tune'. His Ophelia, for example, is mad, and song her expression.

As Nosworthy explains it, "The place of music in the Elizabethan scheme of things [was] ... not simply as a diversion but as an act of faith, and as something no less essential to the overall pattern than the concepts of degree, the body politic, the elements and humours, and the like."<sup>112</sup> While it is widely regarded that this cosmological view

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was based to a considerable extent on concepts derived from Greek philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato, and later syncretized by Boethius and the Christian philosophers, the degree to which Shakespeare utilized this 'scheme of things' has been greatly overlooked. While we can mostly only guess at the actual music Shakespeare's plays may have included in their original performances, we do have plenty of evidence of Shakespeare's understanding of 'music' as contained in the songs that frequent his plays as well as the very content of the poetry itself. While we do not know very much about his sounds, we do know a great deal about his music and poetry as he reflects on them throughout his works.

Burbage's royal patent of 1574 allowed the actors to play songs in their productions, and there is plenty of evidence music was heavily involved in the performance of a play.<sup>113</sup> In Shakespeare's company, Will Kemp was a well-known composer and instrumentalist, not to mention what Shakespeare would have heard in the houses of nobility, his grammar school upbringing, and in the churches, taverns, brothels and markets of England. The pedagogical aims and content of these 'institutions' become in some way inseparable from the kinds of music they produce, and Shakespeare shows a keen awareness of this insight. As is the case for Socrates, music and poetry are of one art.

Although Socrates has plenty to say about music in the orchestral sense, the purpose of his exploration of musical education is as much about the lyrical or poetic content as it is the harmonies themselves. After dwelling for some time on the issue of

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<sup>112</sup> Dunn, C. (Autumn 1969) The Function of Music in Shakespeare's Romances. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4. pp. 391-405

<sup>113</sup> Marder, L. (Nov 1950) Shakespeare's Musical Background. *Modern Language Notes*, Vol 65, No 7. P.500-503

mythical and poetic content in musical education, Socrates temporarily leaves the issue at the decision to promote “less pleasing” poets.<sup>114</sup> For these new poets to succeed, however, there remains a need to investigate the “manner and song of melody”. The melodic content of poetry and music must reinforce the reforms Socrates seeks of Hesiod and Homer’s vengeful tales of heroes and gods.

Socrates links the confusion inherent in these ancient tales with a propensity in his time to create “many-toned or panharmonic” instruments that create indecisive modes of character in young men and women. Harmony and melody must follow the speech, and since the Callipolis requires a censorship of speeches, so too does it require one of melody. Complex melodic accompaniment obscures the austere lyrical content Socrates desires, but it also runs the risk of fostering indecision, intemperance, and violence within the human soul. Socrates professes ignorance regarding the form of all the musical modes, but claims affinity with a musical authority of his time, Damon, who he appears to have had considerable agreement with regarding the effect of different musical types on the souls of men.<sup>115</sup>

Socrates wishes to purge all existing musical modes save two. The first mode, which we will call his ‘warrior’ mode, must imitate the sounds of men who are courageous in all warlike deeds. This mode is meant to activate an instinct within the guardians that is bold without being rash, and violent without being bloodthirsty. It must not only spur on warriors to engage in heroic combat, but more importantly give them confidence when faced with the stark possibility of failure during a wartime expedition. Music of the warrior mode must conquer fear. It must help men to face the “wounds or

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<sup>114</sup> Republic, 398b

<sup>115</sup> Republic 400b, Laches 200b, Alcibiades 1 118c, Isocrates Antidosis, 251.

death” of war by standing firmly and patiently against the winds of “chance”.<sup>116</sup> For Socrates, death, and not life, is chance. The well-trained warrior faces his destiny without fear. Courageous warriors of the past, it is assumed, continuously become a part of the songs themselves and tell tales about the sweetness of a heroes’ afterlife.

The second mode we will call the “peaceable” mode. This mode encourages outward peaceability and the promotion of a kind of temperate wisdom within oneself that can distinguish between the need for violence and diplomacy.<sup>117</sup> Socrates associates the diplomatic function with persuasion and the making of reasonable requests on others, but the peaceable mode encompasses both the foreign and domestic relations of statecraft itself. Socrates claims that the peaceable mode must not only encourage wise interactions with other states through human channels, but also promote a means of prayer to the gods. The same mode that encourages diplomatic relations between states is intended to act as protectorate of faith and trust in the everyday dealings of men, as well as their relationships with the gods.<sup>118</sup>

For Socrates it is the peaceable mode, and not the warlike, that must be associated with the religious activities of the city. Religious music encourages moderation, openness to change and instruction, as well as self-reflection and acceptance of the consequences of one’s actions. Socrates refers to this mode as “voluntary” as opposed to “violent”. Both are ultimately necessary for the stability of the city, but the violent mode appears subordinate in so far as it is involuntary. The warlike mode inspires fearless

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<sup>116</sup> Republic 399a & 400a

<sup>117</sup> Republic 399b

<sup>118</sup> The philosophy of musical mode that Socrates discusses here ties in nicely with my discussion in Chapter 5 on “Shakespeare’s Gods” and how they act for Shakespeare as a kind of protection against several different kinds of external threats.

instincts, but not knowledge. It prepares for courage in war and victory in death, but not genuine self-reflection.

Shakespeare, for his part, uses the notion of musical harmony as his most frequent metaphor for the soundness or wretchedness of a human soul. And yet it never remains strictly a metaphor, for the array of songs and music the plays call for is in itself a truly extraordinary feat. In terms of Shakespeare's use of music for the education of good citizens, he is particularly lucid in the *Merchant of Venice* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In Act Five of *Merchant of Venice*, Lorenzo learns of the imminent return of his friends, which means they have in some way eluded the blood debt owed to Shylock. Calling for music in celebration, Lorenzo hangs upon the beauty of the moonlight and wonders what sort of music might be worth its affection. Lorenzo's study of the heavens leads him to suggest, "soft stillness and the night become the touches of sweet harmony."<sup>119</sup> Here he associates quietude and stillness with the most beautiful harmony imaginable, the very same that underlines the patterns of the stars. It is this harmony that angels teach to "young-eyed" cherubims. Angels, too, require instruction. Such divine education is possible through the demonstration of their own nature's similarity to the harmony of the cosmos. Divine beings achieve their education through a music that is paradoxically 'quiet'. Heavenly music reverberates through the very essence of the soul itself, and not through material existence or the body as such.

The problem for humanity, however, is that Lorenzo sees the excellence of divinely inspired education to be unachievable for man: "Such harmony is in immortal

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<sup>119</sup> *Merchant of Venice* V.I.2502

souls; But whilst this muddy vesture of decay , Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.” The inability to hear the harmony of the cosmos through ordinary human activity means that man must find a way to reconcile perfection with fault, divinity with man. The elusiveness of the unified whole of cosmic music means that human music must divide itself up amongst the elements of the heavens. Lorenzo abandons the desire for the totality of heaven, turning his attention toward “waking Diana” with a hymn. Lorenzo associates the reconciliation in his own life with a particular pattern in the heavens, Diana.

Jessica, however, poses an intriguing philosophic objection to Lorenzo’s desire for a partial human reconstruction of heavenly music. She says rather bluntly that she is “never merry when I hear sweet music”. Jessica believes her constitution to be very different than those who more commonly associate sweet sounds with merriment and celebration. Jessica poses the problem of human subjectivity; how can even a partial reconstruction of divine musical education be possible for the human race when each of us potentially feels the effects of notes and harmonies very differently? What is to account for taste? The uniqueness of human beings is Shakespeare’s trademark, how can he possibly justify a kind of musical education that will sing ‘in tune’ for all peoples always and everywhere? How can Lorenzo respond to Jessica, and perhaps modern philosophy, which contends that the totality of human individuality makes universal postulations useless, harmful, or even impossibly tragic?

Lorenzo’s response to Jessica’s doubts gives us some indication of Shakespeare’s view of the pedagogical function of music, but it also serves as a warning to the attentive members of the audience that all is not as well in the play as is assumed. Lorenzo and

Jessica begin the scene by comparing themselves to Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, and Dido and Aeneas, all love stories of antiquity that end rather tragically. The irony of these lovers comparing themselves to failed romances of antiquity precedes the discussion on music as if Shakespeare wants us to notice precisely how the different manner in which the soul is constituted towards music is indicative of its capacity for a truly equitable and lasting love. A love without music, without harmony, is not quite love at all. Does not Jessica's sadness at the sweetness of the night's sounds suggest she may have gone too far in abandoning her father, her religion, and her people?

Indeed, Jessica's somewhat muted hesitation parallels Shylock's disturbance when he hears that there will be musical masques in the street.<sup>120</sup> Although we cannot know the precise nature of the sort of music Shylock feared in relation to his family's well-being, the presence of a masque suggests what Socrates would call a 'many-stringed, inharmonious, and involuntary form' that could certainly incite Venice's Christian population, potentially emboldening divisions of race and creed within the city itself. This is, perhaps, a reasonable and precise type of musical caution. For Jessica, however, even the sweet silence of cosmic music arouses in her suspicion and sadness, which coupled with Lorenzo's retort, suggests Shylock's censorship passed onto his daughter a kind of intemperate asceticism.

Lorenzo's rebuke could easily have been spoken by Socrates himself:

The man that hath no music in himself,  
 Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,  
 Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils;  
 The motions of his spirit are dull as night

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<sup>120</sup>Merchant , 2.5.29-37

And his affections dark as Erebus:  
 Let no such man be trusted. (5.1.89-94)

For Socrates, the absolute necessity of a musical education is predicated on the creation of citizens and guardians who know when to be peaceable, and when to be violently protective of their city. This entire Socratic argument is constructed in order to defeat the unjust soul, the unmusical beast, the tyrant. While the Jewish reluctance the play offers is understandable in light of the incredible tensions with Christianity, it is not tenable for Shakespeare or Socrates as a basis upon which to educate the young or form the foundation of the city as such. Moses and David, for their parts, certainly seemed to agree.<sup>121</sup>

Lorenzo's treatise, however, refers only to the peaceable mode, making no mention whatsoever of the warlike. Lorenzo also describes violent men who, upon hearing music, are brought to peace:

Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud,  
 Which is the hot condition of their blood;  
 If they but hear perchance a trumpet sound,  
 Or any air of music touch their ears,  
 You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,  
 Their savage eyes turn'd to a modest gaze

Lorenzo answers as a lover might, seeing the crazed violence Jessica and her father feared brought to a "modest gaze" through the sweetness of a trumpet. He does not consider the other possibility, that through the playing of music men may be emboldened in their violence. Shakespeare makes it clear enough he wants us to consider what is

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<sup>121</sup> Samuel 16:23, 18:10 and Deuteronomy 31:30.

missing in Lorenzo's understanding given that he ironically has him use the trumpet as his soothing instrument; although we can certainly imagine the trumpet giving off an air of royalty or the calming presence of authority, it is also the instrument commonly used to incite troops to war.

Portia reconciles the understandable hesitation of the Jewish families with the social and pedagogical functions Lorenzo claims exist in music. Portia arrives and, hearing the music coming from her house says "Nothing is good, I see, without respect; Methinks it sounds much sweeter than by day." Commentators who focus only on the first half of the statement have been misled into thinking Portia, and thus Shakespeare, claim that music is an inherently subjective experience.<sup>122</sup> The second sentence, however, makes it clear Portia means that the context in which one experiences music is as important as the harmonies themselves. By day, the majesty of the moment would be lost on her, but on this night, with all that has happened preceding this moment, she is captivated by the moonlit melody. The crow might sing as sweetly as the lark, but only when unattended by human ears. No human being could mistake the melody of the lark for the cawing of the crow, just as the form that spurs man on to peace cannot be mistaken for one of war, even though both forms are good only in respect to the context in which they are used. Both forms, and so all music, are prone to the abuse of context.

In this way, Portia's position on music allows room for both Jessica's sadness and Lorenzo's optimism because of the differing contexts in which they are experienced. Shakespeare understands Jessica and Shylock's condition, but does not praise it. The

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<sup>122</sup>For an interesting introductory discussion of the dichotomy between modern deconstructionist / subjectivist readings of Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare and literature in general, see: Kayman, M. (2002) Question of Jurisdiction. *Law and Literature*. Volume 18. P.2

Socratic reform of musical education does not condemn Jessica, but rather seeks to reform the social condition that makes her sadness the result of her poorly contextualized experience of beautiful music. In this way Shakespeare agrees with Socrates that music is apt to be misused in construing the passions of men, but what of the further argument that by promoting these musical forms children can be properly directed toward the philosophic education of the guardians, or even the heights of the philosopher kings themselves?

In the *Taming of the Shrew*, both Aristotle and Socrates are mentioned by name.<sup>123</sup> It is here, in this early play, that we first learn of Shakespeare's equation of music with a philosophic education. Luciento, who also moonlights as a tutor of Latin (a language in which Plato's works would have been readily accessible), connects the "cause why music was ordained" with philosophy itself. For Luciento, a philosophic education must come prior to music, just as for Socrates instrumentation must be designed to fit within his already existing philosophically reformed poetry.<sup>124</sup> In both accounts, reason forms the core that music is meant to supplement. Tranio's early comment to Luciento affirms philosophy as the foundational component, "Glad that you thus continue your resolve, to suck the sweets of sweet philosophy." Luciento's virtue is directly connected to his philosophic education.

If Shakespeare did indeed believe, as Socrates did, that music is an indispensable component to a proper political/philosophic education, then we should expect to find

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<sup>123</sup>The *Taming of the Shrew* is the only text in which both philosophers are mentioned by name. Aristotle also appears by name in *Troilus and Cressida*, and the context in which he appears there it is clear Shakespeare knew his thought well. He claims Aristotle thought young men unfit to hear philosophy, a position Socrates also holds in the *Republic*.

<sup>124</sup>*Republic*, 398a.

evidence of this in his most contemplative characters. Richard II famously becomes a much more interesting person as his kingdom and sanity vanish before our eyes. Richard explains his increasing powers of self-awareness in musical terms:

Music do I hear?  
 Ha, ha! keep time.—How sour sweet music is,  
 When time is broke, and no proportion kept!  
 So is it in the music of men's lives.  
 And here have I the daintiness of ear,  
 To check time broke in a disorder'd string;  
 But, for the concord of my state and time,  
 Had not an ear to hear my true time broke...  
 This music mads me: let it sound no more:  
 For though it hath holp madmen to their wits,  
 In me, it seems, it will make wise men mad. (V.V.41)

Richard is very much like Jessica in the sense that the context of his prison, while freeing his mind, has chained his body. He can see the world anew, he can attain some wisdom, but the music he hears is essentially a call to action he cannot complete. He couches his new found knowledge in musical terms, but he is not satisfied with lament. Richard's self-awareness generates a comparison between his quick ear for broken time in music, and his own delay in hearing the 'breaking' of his own 'state and time.' Richard himself is this very disorder'd string, who has been playing his part 'out of time' and thus has resulted in breaking the concord, the harmony of the various parts which compose both his soul and the state itself.

Hamlet, perhaps Shakespeare's most robust thinker, also uses musical metaphors to express his philosophic superiority. Hamlet confronts Guildenstern for his inability to play a simple instrument like the recorder while believing he could "play" him for a fool, "Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will,

though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me." (Act III, Scene 2) Hamlet is indifferent to all but his ability to 'out-think' the various Danes he encounters in court, and he understands this superiority in musical terms. Hamlet explicitly refers to the nobility of his own soul as akin to the 'excellent music' within him. He cannot be played upon due to an awareness of his peculiar brand of speculative wisdom, derived from what he sees as the sophistication of his own noble 'instrument', reason itself.

Despite the excellent music Hamlet hears within himself, he cannot hear the music of the spheres. No benevolent gods guide him to a state of love or reconciliation. Hamlet's music gives him the tools necessary to understand the political power of imitation and drama, but not what to do with them. While for Socrates art is but an imitation of nature, we see in his criticisms of poetry, as well as the puppeteers in the allegory of the cave, a clear and present danger to political life. Imitation may be at best three times removed from the truth, but the real danger appears as it becomes even further removed, or worst of all works to perpetuate outright distortions or lies.

What Shakespeare argues through Hamlet is that the genuine desire for knowledge of the real world can in some part be achieved through a drama that understands itself as an imitation of nature, but treats its subject with the utmost seriousness. The consequences in the imitation must be as profound and real as they are in life itself. Hamlet is perhaps nowhere more serious, more profound, and more himself than in his sincere affection for stagecraft and the visiting players. What could be a higher, nobler use of poetry than his desire to catch the "conscience of the king"? Let us therefore look at imitation in *Hamlet* in some depth, to see if Shakespeare's self-understanding can hold up to Socrates' demands.

Hamlet begins by insisting the players enact the speech precisely as he spoke it, in other words, as closely as possible to the real thing. Hamlet worries they will fill their voices with unnecessary bombast or by swinging their limbs wildly in order to get the point across, which he argues is a detriment to good art. Genuine imitation flows “trippingly” off the tongue, after the manner of spontaneous human speech.<sup>125</sup> Hamlet’s worry mirrors the Socratic insistence on reason restricting excess passion, “for in the very torrent, tempest, and (as I may say) whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.” Socratic smoothness is identical with temperance. In terms of speech this means it must neither be bombastically loud or excessively quiet, it must follow the pattern of reasonable human speech, that which flows “trippingly” off the tongue. Hamlet’s advice to the players is ironic in the sense that it forms an imminent critique of his own character’s actions within the drama of *Hamlet* itself. The scene as Hamlet wishes to draw it out is filled with the same passionate tempest that animates his spirit of revenge, but moderated by a temperate “smoothness” that ensures the ends are reached. Hamlet seeks to achieve through drama what he cannot achieve in life, the temperate balance between reason and passion that Socrates thought so woefully absent in the drama of his time.

Hamlet continues by insinuating that if it were up to him, actors who overplay their parts would be badly whipped, for their crime “out-herods Herod”. Hamlet’s extreme demands for censorship parallel *The Republic*, and just as Socrates realizes in Book X that he has perhaps gone too far and would consider letting poets back in if they undertake some reforms, Hamlet similarly senses from the reaction of the players that he might be scaring them into timidity and subsequently backs off. “Be not too tame

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<sup>125</sup> Hamlet, 3.2

neither; but let your own discretion be your tutor” is his compromise, and he comes off sounding very much as Aristotle might when describing the manner in which virtues like courage must guard against rashness on one hand and pusillanimity on the other.<sup>126</sup>

Hamlet’s self-correction leads him to instruct the players as to the general purpose and ends of imitation.

Actions and words, Hamlet says, must be joined together so as to unify their purpose. The unity of imitation must proceed, however, according to one “special observance”, that it “o’erstep not the modesty of nature”. Hamlet tells us that nature is the principle upon which imitation is to be judged, and it is the modesty of nature that stands to be degraded by inferior quality players and playwrights. Invoking Socrates and *The Republic* directly, Hamlet claims the true aim of art is, and has always been, to “hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure”. In the *Republic*, Socrates too claimed that a kind of god-like imitation would be possible if a mirror were to be held up to nature, and like Hamlet he has his reservations about its success.<sup>127</sup> Socrates also claims the test by which we can know whether this kind of imitation succeeds is if it makes human beings and the political community better.<sup>128</sup> Hamlet’s intentions for the staging of the ‘Mouse Trap’ clearly follow this noble aim, but he fails to make either himself or Denmark into something great. Imitation cannot provide a direct link to virtue

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<sup>126</sup>Aristotle. (2009) *Nicomachean Ethics*. (W.D. Ross trans) New York, World Library Classics. Book II Paragraph 2.

<sup>127</sup>*Republic*, 596e

<sup>128</sup>*Republic* 599d

in the public realm. Virtue, like nature, possesses a modesty not easily replicated through imitative poetry.

Where Hamlet fails, however, Shakespeare the poet succeeds. Imitation can reproduce the spirit of the age, which for Hamlet is correctly marked by murder, infidelity, and injustice. While imitation must therefore aim at noble ends, like the desire to ‘catch the conscience of the king’, reproductions of the ‘spirit of the age’ runs the risk of provoking inappropriate laughter or grievant censure if the least bit overdone. Plato’s imitative reproduction of the Socratic way of life through the dialogues cannot ever give an accurate representation of the face of virtue, as his seventh letter attests, but it can point us in the direction of a truly noble way of life.<sup>129</sup> Hamlet reminds us that the responsibilities of imitative poets, properly understood, are of the highest order. While responsible use aims at maintenance of a just political realm, abuse of imitative poetry can pervert such noble aims into mockery and mere play.

For both Hamlet and Plato the risk of poetry is in leaving a kind of comic stain where judicious grievance was appropriate, and vice versa:

Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though  
it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious  
grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance  
o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I  
have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly (not to  
speak it profanely), that, neither having the accent of  
Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so  
strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature's  
journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated  
humanity so abominably.

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<sup>129</sup> Plato. (1952) *The Seventh Letter*. (Harward, J trans) London, Royal Collection Trust. 341b-345c

Hamlet has on his mind, as he always does, the injustice to his father's name and reputation that was achieved through an insufficient period of mourning and respect for the dead. His father, haunting the night with complaints of injustice, must be given solace. Hamlet observes, further, that the most abominable of imitations occur when players pay insufficient attention to the distinct differences between Christians and pagans.

Their struts and bellows, as he calls them, must follow from the different character of the religions themselves. In this way Hamlet, and so Shakespeare, reminds us not only of general rules for the production of successful imitative poetry, but gives us a clue as to why Hamlet is so utterly unable to procure for himself successful political action. He is unsure whether he is to strut and bellow as a Christian or a pagan. His entire being is consumed by an appetite for revenge that is utterly inconsistent with his Christian understanding of the universe. His Homeric-like father makes a demand that his son, educated in the home of Luther himself, cannot in good conscience comply with, nor reject. Shakespeare teaches us about imitative poetry's ability to connect political virtue with psychological investigation in general. Hamlet's great political triumph is the psychological truth he unveils through the staging of his play, he fails because he cannot translate what the poetic staging teaches him into any kind of meaningful public action.

### **Poet Educator**

In addition to the use of musical metaphor to demonstrate human folly and wisdom, it can also be said that Shakespeare understood his own role as poet and maker of music as playing a demonstrative role in the education of his audience. From the political triumph of imitation in Hamlet's master psychology of "the play's the thing", to the clear relationship we see between Athen's tragic poets and Timon's completely flawed self-understanding, Shakespeare, like Socrates, is always keen to show us that the poet and his works are as apt to be misused and harmful as they are laudable and wise. One of the most crucial of Shakespeare's reflections on himself and his art is to be found in a *Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is here that the poet fully faces the realities and consequences of his art upon himself, his subjects, and political life as such.

More strange than true: I never may believe  
 These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.  
 Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
 Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
 More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
 The lunatic, the lover and the poet  
 Are of imagination all compact:  
 One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,  
 That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,  
 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:  
 The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
 And as imagination bodies forth  
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
 A local habitation and a name.  
 That, if it would but apprehend some joy,  
 It comprehends some bringer of that joy.

Theseus sides with the 'cool reason' that lies within Athen's walls over the poetic-fantasies induced in the woods of Arden. Theseus refuses to believe in antique fables, otherwise known as 'ignoble lies', because the poets who create them have stronger

imaginations than reason itself can comprehend. What is unreasonable is confusing, and confusion leads to disorder. When young men and women are educated on the basis of such fanciful tales they are in fact submitting themselves to “the forms of things unknown”, an “airy nothing” that spills forth from the poet’s pen. The poet does not understand the consequences of what he writes, precisely in the same manner as the lover does not know why he loves (as is the subject of this play) or the madmen does not know that he is mad (as is the subject of many others).

Poets are so powerful that they can create entire realities, as when an ordinary brow becomes as beautiful as Helen’s. The romantic imagination has the power not only to persuade, but to educate. Such “fine frenzy rolling” can lead the city and man to tragedy, precisely as it does the lover to despair and the madman to death. Theseus therefore argues that poets must relate their imaginative fantasies in some way to the demands of reason. Socrates-as-poet crafts the noble lie around the demands of the city of reason/justice. Socrates “comprehends some bringer of that joy” and demands that such poets temper their fine frenzy with an antidote of cool reason, precisely what Theseus here suggests for the play’s lovers. Love, as Helen notes in this play, is blind, but statecraft need not be. Theseus can see the forest through the trees and so argues that poets who submit themselves to moderation by reason are in fact the bridge that links eros with the city. Theseus does not hate love, or despise eros, but demands the poets frenzy cease serving an “airy nothing” and instead serve something with form. Perhaps even *the* forms.

The context of Theseus’ speech means Shakespeare includes a self-critique of the play, and thus his own work, which speaks to the self-understanding Socrates thought

absolutely necessary in his reformed poet. Shakespeare understood very well the ‘ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry’ and nowhere is it more apparent than in Theseus’ speech. That Shakespeare is a poet and playwright does not mean that he disagrees with Socrates regarding the best way of life because through an examination of the quality of Shakespeare’s poetry we see that it is self-consciously transformed by a Platonic transfiguration of values. There exists no absolute triumph of “fine frenzy rolling” anywhere in the Shakespearean canon. This is not whatsoever meant to make the Bard into some frigid stoic or simple Platonic-mouthpiece, but rather that the measure of Shakespeare’s genius is in his ability to scale the absolute heights of poetic power without succumbing to the airy nothing of unhinged passion or the romantic imagination. He presents his own work as he emulates nature, with *modesty*.

Without belabouring the point, allow me to examine a few additional examples of Shakespeare’s use of musical/poetic metaphor in his examination of nature. The most discussed, and perhaps overwhelming, example is to be found in the *Tempest*, where there is a deep tradition of identifying Prospero’s power with poetry, and Ariel even as the “personification of poetry itself”.<sup>130</sup> If this is true, then it stands to reason Prospero’s power and his relationship with ‘poetry personified’ arises in some way from his deep study of what he calls the “liberal arts”.<sup>131</sup> This art, as it has been handed down to us from Plato, are those subjects necessary for study if one wishes to be truly free. We see a part of that study in the character of Ariel, as she sings and dances her way through the

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<sup>130</sup> G. Wilson Knight. (1947) *The Crown of Life*. London, Oxford University Press. Knight calls Ariel "a personification of poetry itself" p. 210 He later likens Prospero's art to poetry as well, p.252. See also remarks on Prospero’s art being directly linked to poetry in: Muir, K. (1978) *Shakespeare’s Comic Sequence*. New York: Barnes and Noble. P.192

<sup>131</sup> *Tempest* 1.2

play, casting her musical spell over the island's new inhabitants. To Ferdinand, Ariel's art of persuasion is indistinguishable from music itself. She educates, according to Prospero's wishes, with the strings of a lyre and the voice of an angel.

Embedded in the *Tempest*, of course, is a kind of statement on the comings and goings of personal power in relation to statecraft, and in Stephano's comic encounter with revolution, he compares the acquisition of a kingdom with the ability to hear music of your own liking "for nothing". (*Tempest* 3.2) The dream of political power is expressed through the metaphor of music and poetry because it appears to those who do not have it as though it were a kind of fanciful delight. Once acquired, it seems to Stephano one may merely sit back and listen to the music of political power 'for free'. Power is the end result, the goal, the outcome. We see in Prospero, however, that the balance between personal enjoyment of music and the liberal arts brings with it tremendous political consequences when the arts themselves are divorced from the continual maintenance of power. Power is maintained through a mastery of the liberal arts, it is never free. When Prospero himself says, "when I have required / some heavenly music, which even now I do, / to work mine end upon their senses" he is making a literal claim about the power of music to influence the senses of citizens. (*Tempest*, 5.1) Heavenly music implies solemn sounds, perhaps, but it also speaks to the gravity of the power Prospero now claims for it. Prospero's study on the island has led him to believe nature, as it were, can be modified through the power of music.

By way of summation, Prospero's poetry fosters the loving relationship between Ferdinand and Miranda, it conveys to them the importance of self-restraint, and it intends to prepare them for the political redemption of Naples and Milan. To Caliban and his like

it offers pleasures less harmful than alcohol, and assists with their learning of deference and respect. Alonso is reminded of justice, and Gonzalo even comes to suspect a providential power watches over them, preparing them for a kind of salvation. This is the substance of the island's essentially Platonic teaching, imparted chiefly through Prospero's music and illusion, sounds and poetry.

### **Musical Moods**

What is arguably Prospero's complete mastery over the relation between poetics and politics is, however, a stand out. He is a Shakespearean Superman, and his reliance on magic to hold his world together forces us to think about the ways in which music can help teach us also about our shortcomings as human beings. When Cleopatra calls music that "moody food of us that trade in love", she very much surmises what is missing from the *Tempest*.<sup>132</sup> Music, for Cleopatra, is the only art that can attempt to capture the wild highs and vicious lows of life's moments of sublime passion. Love, and so too music, is *painful*.

Nowhere is the painful alliance of passion and poetry more vivid than in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*. Music's pedagogical power lies as much in its ability to guide our ascension as it does assay our collective, and inevitable, feelings of loss:

*My restless discord loves no stops nor rests;  
A woeful hostess brooks not merry guests.  
Relish your nimble notes to pleasing ears;  
Distress like dumps, when time is kept with tears. (Lucrece 1124)*

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<sup>132</sup>Antony and Cleopatra 3.5

Lucrece makes the point that “My woes are tedious, though my words are brief”<sup>133</sup> and so we see in this poem an attempt to use music as a quite literal expression of pain. Everything in this section points to what Shakespeare understands as the relationship between poetry/music and the all too human attempt to explain or describe the pain of the passions. Elizabethan readers would have understood ‘Nimble notes’ to refer to what we may call ‘brilliant music’ and dumps refers to a slow, mournful dance.<sup>134</sup> Dance, too, then can teach us something about the human experience of suffering. Distress becomes like a slow song danced to alone, the tears on our faces keeping our movements in time. Discord, stops, rests, notes, ears, time, are all Shakespeare’s deliberate attempt to infuse the language of music into our understanding of Lucrece’s suffering. Shakespeare makes apparent what we already knew, the sad songs of others comfort us in sufferings of our own, and when they resonate truly, provide some level of relief from the loneliness and despondence we all feel when we keep ‘time with tears.’

Shakespeare fuses his understanding of the way in which music’s ‘moodiness’ can swing with the passion from one extreme to another in the play *Pericles*. That anyone could doubt the same author wrote Lucrece as was responsible for inspiring these lines is truly staggering:

You're a *fair viol*, and *your sense the strings*,  
 Who, *finger'd* to make man his *lawful music*,  
 Would draw heaven down and all the gods to hearken;  
 But being *play'd upon before your time*,  
 Hell only danceth at so harsh a chime.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Rape of Lucrece line 1309

<sup>134</sup> Naylor, E. (1896) Shakespeare and Music. LONDON, J.M. DENT & CO. ALDINE HOUSE. p.23-24

<sup>135</sup>Pericles 1.1.81

Pericles compares matrimony with the performance of an accomplished musician, which properly ordered runs, 'in tune,' and 'in time.' The comparison turns when Pericles examines the content of the unnamed daughter's lawless passion. It now becomes synonymous with the 'disorder'd' playing of a bad violist, who is playing 'before his time,' thus distorting the nature of the music into something fit for a dance of devils rather than angels. In terms of the incestuous relationship to which Pericles speaks, there is a kind of natural harmony which encompasses the nature of human relationships, kingship and matrimony, but is importantly accompanied by the musical harmony that is fair, in time, and perhaps most importantly, lawful.

It may still be useful to show how Shakespeare's grasp of musical/poetic metaphor and his desire to educate us on how they may be used to explain and control the passions for better and worse is analogous to what we find in Plato. There is no better way of demonstrating the veracity of the link here than by appealing again to a *Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the *Phaedrus* we learn of Socrates' famous analogy of the charioteer, wherein he must prevent the rougher steed from overruling the horse of reason and moral impulse.<sup>136</sup> As it is for Shakespeare, it is not for man to simply succumb to the nature of the competing colts, but rather for the charioteer to control the impulses of the negative passions en route to the kind of self-investigation that leads to true enlightenment:

Theseus. This fellow doth not *stand upon points*.

Lysander. He hath rid his prologue like a rough colt; he knows not the *stop*....

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<sup>136</sup>Phaedrus. 246a - 254e

Hippolyta. Indeed, he hath played on this prologue like a *child on a recorder; a sound, but not in government.*<sup>137</sup>

As in the *Phaedrus*, we see Theseus offer a critique based on the abandonment of reason, or points. Lysander adds the analogy of the charioteer to the critique and in doing so offers a perhaps inadvertent link to the world of music and poetry. Hippolyta completes the analogy by noting that the charioteer who actively chooses the colt of unreason and base passion is like a child on a recorder. They produce notes but not music. The analogy completes itself in relation to the polis as a whole. Politics exists, everyone can agree, but more often than not it comes off as childish, as producing political action but not sound government. Shakespeare's ability for each character to add to the discussion and feed off each other is rivalled only by Plato, and the content of this particular discussion demonstrates the kinship they share in their use of music and poetry to demonstrate the potential beauty, and horror, of their application to the development of the human soul and the polis at large.

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<sup>137</sup>Midsummer Night's Dream, 5.1, for another connection to image of the Charioteer see also Measure for Measure 2.4 "I have begun, and now I give my sensual race the rein."

## Chapter 5: Shakespeare's Gods

While much has been written about Shakespeare's religious upbringing, potential Catholic sympathies, and his purported humanism, very few authors have looked directly at his presentation of divine characters in the plays themselves. This may explain why, in part, Shakespeare's creative re-imagining of the pagan gods has gone so thoroughly under researched in the academic literature. Do Shakespeare's divine interventions represent a significant contribution to theological debate, or are they inconsistent and incompatible *deus ex machina*? To combat this question, I propose a line of inquiry that marries Shakespeare's rather inventive use of the pagan gods with perhaps his only parallel in this regard, Plato. If we take Socrates seriously when he says Hesiod's descriptions of the nature of the gods are the biggest lies ever told, then we should expect to find in his 'reformed poet' a refutation in some way of these views.<sup>138</sup> Through close readings of several plays I aim to explore one aspect of Shakespeare's contribution to the theological-political problem; are gods necessary, as Socrates argues, for the maintenance of a just regime? Could it be that Shakespeare actually creates 'new' divinities that synthesize elements of Plato's critique of the gods with the New Testament's emphasis on love and faith? Is this the sort of poet Plato might welcome back into the city in speech?

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<sup>138</sup> Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, Allan Bloom (trans) (USA: Basic Books, 1991). Socrates (378a) claims the biggest lies, not a 'fine' lie, are contained in Hesiod's description of the vengeful, incestuous gods. See: Hesiod, *Theogony*, C. Schlegel and H. Weinfield (trans) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), especially p.154. While Shakespeare's reliance on Biblical allusion and symbolism has been well documented, the significance of his reading of Plato is an emerging field of study.

Supposing he is, then where Hesiods' gods express spirited vengefulness, we should expect to find some measure of reconciliation and order. In this section I examine Shakespeare's direct presentations of divinity under the assumption he shares the Socratic perspective that poetic imitations of heroes and gods are responsible for the shaping of citizens' souls, and thus form the foundation for just and unjust regimes alike. In all of Shakespeare, only Diana, Jupiter, Hymen and Hecate are allowed to grace his stage. By showing specifically how Diana and Jupiter depart from their ancient Greek and Roman counterparts, this section makes the argument that they are in fact 'new' gods in so far as they closely follow Socrates' suggestions for their reform. Shakespeare draws extensively on Biblical imagery in order to transcend the ancient tragic mode, but his gods triumph love and reconciliation through a distinctly Platonic form of argumentation and critique. In doing so outside the boundaries of systemized theology, Shakespeare illuminates the political necessity of a new spiritual destiny for the English-speaking world.

There is plenty of recent literature that makes the case for a Shakespeare who had been reading his Plato rather closely.<sup>139</sup> Like the myths of *The Republic*, Shakespeare's gods ennoble man. Love, reconciliation, and honour are triumphed by Shakespeare's gods without metaphysical justification, priestly mediation, or the insistence of a systemic theology. It is enough for Shakespeare that men believe in gods. Might it be, as John Alvis recently claimed, that Shakespeare's gods are, "odd intrusions...not solemn

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<sup>139</sup> See for ex: Barbara Parker, *Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Rome: a political study of the Roman works* (USA: Rosemont Publishing, 2004) ; MW. Rowe, 'Iago's Elenchus: Shakespeare, Othello, and the Platonic Inheritance' in H. Jost (ed.) *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature* (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2010)

theophanies suggestive of intent to convey and inspire reverence”?<sup>140</sup> On the contrary, Shakespeare succeeds by showing us how belief in the gods gives men personal and spiritual success, a common history, and inspired purpose, precisely through the incorporation of solemn theophanies. The divine characters form sharp critiques of their ancient manifestations that are meant as a guide for our own lives. Shakespeare’s gods are not inconsistent or incompatible with each other, but are rather archetypes of a kind of religious experience that rejects the Homeric principles of existence in favour of an insistence that spiritual and political justice proceed from the reverent desire for repentance, reconciliation, and love.

Let us begin then with a divine emergence that halts an otherwise surely tragic scenario. The prologue and first two acts of *Pericles* are famously disputed because of their ‘unShakespearean’ qualities.<sup>141</sup> The tempest-infused language in Act III is certainly more familiar to readers of Shakespeare’s later works, but dismissals of *Pericles*’ first acts unduly deny the possibility that Shakespeare began the work with a poetic purpose different than other plays from the same period. For Socrates, the trouble with ancient poetry was its propensity to encourage immoderate wickedness through the imitation of vengeful and incestuous heroes and gods. Poets must not be allowed back into the *Republic*’s city in speech until such a time as they can craft an apology for themselves and their art. Such an apology for poetry must be self-consciously imitative, promote the

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<sup>140</sup> John Alvis, ‘Shakespeare’s Understanding of Honor’ in Dobski and Gish (eds.), *Souls with Longing: Representations of Honor and Love in Shakespeare* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2011), pp. 22.

<sup>141</sup> The disputes over what is or what is not genuinely Shakespeare are too numerous to delve into here. For a good example of the “unShakespearean” view see: Harold Goddard, *Meaning of Shakespeare Vol.2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 241 and for an eloquent rendering of the authentic view see: Wilson G. Knight, *The Crown of Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 32.

honourable virtues of man, and contain a new notion of divine and familial piety that transcends the ancient tales of anger, lust, greed and domination.<sup>142</sup>

Shakespeare crafts the beginning of Pericles in precisely this Socratic sense:

To sing a song that old was sung,  
 From ashes ancient Gower is come;  
 Assuming man's infirmities,  
 To glad your ear, and please your eyes.  
 It hath been sung at festivals,  
 On ember-eves and holy-ales;  
 And lords and ladies in their lives  
 Have read it for restoratives:  
 The purchase is to make men glorious;  
 Et bonum quo antiquius, eo melius.<sup>143</sup> (i.1-10)

Gower takes the stage and claims he has returned to sing an old song. Like Plato, Gower claims the imitation herein is not simply for entertainment, but for the instruction of its audience. Imitation arouses sensual pleasures, but it also has a sacred “restorative” function that aims at making men glorious. He concludes suggestively, ‘the more ancient a good, the better’.

But what does Gower mean by an ancient good? The audience knows very well that this is not the Gower of old, for this man claims to have risen from the ashes in order to assume “man’s infirmities.” This Gower sees man as a frail, mortal thing. But through imitation of glorious deeds, man may transcend his mortality and partake in a notion of something higher; the play has an explicit philosophic purpose. This new Gower is unlike the ancients in that he aims not primarily to please, but to instruct. The new

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<sup>142</sup>Republic, 378c and 390e-391d .

<sup>143</sup>All references to Shakespeare are drawn from William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works: Two Volumes*, Clarke and Wright (eds.) (New York: Nelson Doubleday, 1936) and will take the form of in text citation for simplicity’s sake. Subsequent direct quotes follow directly from the first cited line unless otherwise noted.

Gower speaks of the authority of the ancient world while belonging wholly to the new. The new Gower distances himself from the old by claiming he will “tell you what mine authors say”, without letting the ancient authors speak for themselves.<sup>144</sup> The new Gower reinvents the old in precisely the manner in which Socrates reinvents the Homeric gods and heroes. The play begins with a rebirth; a new vision of what poetry might be for the human community.

It would be hard, I think, to overstate the horror we confront at the beginning of *Pericles*. Antiochus takes his daughter in incest upon the death of his queen. The hopefulness in Gower’s rebirth is immediately contrasted with the ugliness of Antioch’s. The unnamed incestuous daughter does not lament her condition; the ancient world provides tacit approval for the incestuous relationship Shakespeare presents. Pericles, like the audience before him however, is in shock. He is in an ancient tale, but not of it. The play’s apology, in the Socratic sense, proceeds from an explicit rejection of the ancient gods. To recast Gower’s words in light of Pericles’ predicament, the more ancient an evil, the worse its effect.

Pericles’ first words echo Socrates in the sense of his own apology, as well as his condemnation of Homer for making men fear death above all else.<sup>145</sup> Pericles believes “death no hazard in this enterprise” because his soul is emboldened by an image of attaining glory through the praise of the beautiful princess (i.i.10). Pericles is willing to

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<sup>144</sup>Consider that the original *Confessio Amantis* by Gower tells us in the prologue that too much wisdom dulls the senses and therefore the only way to get men to read is to write equally about ‘lust’ and ‘lore’. That it also contains a dedication to Richard II demonstrates just how meaningfully different Shakespeare’s prologue is. Gower’s original is explicitly Christian throughout, whereas Shakespeare’s is cloaked in considerable imagery and allegory, another indication of his debt to Plato.

<sup>145</sup>Republic, 386a – 387b.

risk his life for what he thinks is the ideal of beauty. Antiochus, meanwhile, alludes to the ancient gods as witness to his incest, claiming that Jove himself approves of his daughter being dressed “like a bride”, which only we know she has already secretly become. He continues by saying, “The senate-house of planets all did sit, to knit in her their best perfections”, which invokes the ancient gods not only as witnesses to their incest, but also as the divine creators of her incestuous virtue. He knows the gods love his relationship because he has modelled his own actions after theirs. The young princess remains unnamed because however terrible her deed appears, she is blameless in her approval of actions sanctioned by a man who is not only her father, but also her king. In another time, another place, her piety to father and king would be a laudable quality indeed.

Whereas Antiochus cites Jove, the Roman inheritor of Zeus’ incestuous mythology, Pericles greets the princess by claiming the gods ask him to “taste the fruit of yon celestial tree, or die in the adventure” (i.i.20). Pericles is being tempted to taste the forbidden fruit; the allusion is not so much to Greece as it is Jerusalem. The fruit of knowledge will tempt Pericles, but it is rotten and decayed to the core. Antiochus too speaks of the princess as a “golden fruit, but dangerous to be touch'd”. She is dangerous to Pericles because he risks his life for her hand, but also to Antiochus because even a king who appeals to the incestuous gods for approval cannot entirely remove the forbidden quality of his actions. His tyrannical mind allows him to sexually love his daughter, but it must be kept from society at all costs. Pericles is unmoved by Antiochus’ attempt to deter him because he says life is but a “breath”, and that he and his riches are destined to return “to the earth from whence they came” (i.i.45-50). A God whose very

breath gives man life guides Pericles; and when such breathe of life is lost, “till thou returne to the earth: for out of it wast thou taken, because thou art dust, and to dust shalt thou returne.”<sup>146</sup>

The riddle that stands between the blissful ignorance of Antiochus’ people and the horrifying reality of the truth can only hold for so long.<sup>147</sup> Pericles solves the riddle, the discovery of which exiles him forever. Once he deciphers the incest, he wonders aloud why the gods would allow such a monstrous deed. Pericles mourns the princess, but claims that evil itself delights in the incest of this royal family, and however blameless the princess may be, he is no longer moved by her beauty. It is destroyed on account of her sin. Pericles habituates a decidedly Biblical spiritual centre, but his argumentation possesses a distinctly Platonic ring.

Kings are earth's gods; in vice their law's  
their will; And if Jove stray, who dares say Jove doth ill?  
It is enough you know; and it is fit,  
What being more known grows worse, to smother it. (i.i.103-107)

Pericles echoes Socrates’ predicament before the Athenian jury. To decry the injustice of the city’s gods presupposes knowledge of true divinity, his own subsequent impiety, and in turn the ill repute of philosophy. That kingship makes its will the law is not in itself the problem, but when allied with an unjust or monstrous foundation, vice becomes codified by earthly and divine authority. Like Socrates, Pericles will not overtly

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<sup>146</sup>Genesis 2:7 & 3:19; All quotations will refer to the Geneva Bible, the one Shakespeare appears to have been in frequent contact with. The allusion here is quite deliberately Biblical, but there is no indication Pericles is consciously aware of Abrahamic peoples or their religion. The allusions therefore reinforce the fact that Pericles views the gods differently than those around him, he believes in a ‘new’ notion of divinity that has no specific name or identity.

<sup>147</sup>It is interesting that both Oedipus and Pericles’ use of incest revolve around the solving of a riddle. Shakespeare certainly wants us to think about his differences with Sophocles. One play is hopelessly tragic, the other is resolved through penitence and divine benevolence.

challenge the authority of law or god, but claims that by bringing the issue to light it will in time “smother” the crime. Tales will be told of the injustice of Antioch, just as they are told of the injustice of the Athenian people.

The alliance of Biblical imagery with Socratic wisdom has the effect of producing a new kind of political hero. Pericles will not openly oppose the injustice before him, but rather takes solace in a kind of faith that believes the awareness or knowledge of evil itself provides for its own undoing.<sup>148</sup> Pericles admonishes the horror of the “eater of her mother’s flesh” and the serpent that feeds on “sweetest flowers”, but is afraid for his life if he stays (i.i.130-140). This is the impetus for Pericles’ voyage to sea, where he comes to believe his wife and daughter have both tragically perished.

The resolution of the play is, in effect, a miracle. It is not the sort of miracle whereby we would say “So spake Zeus in anger, whose wisdom is everlasting”, but quite the opposite.<sup>149</sup> Instead of retribution, we are given an image of divine reconciliation. The first overt clue that Shakespeare intends for us to consider the role of faith in shaping our ends occurs in Act V where Marina is inspired to persist in her questioning of the mute Pericles in order to ‘restore’ him. We are told Pericles had not talked for three months, and the only reason Marina persists is because she feels a warmth overtake her body and a voice whisper “Go not till he speak”(v.i.95). Marina’s daimon urges her towards a moment of sublime reconciliation. The divine assistance Marina receives leads

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<sup>148</sup>The formulation Pericles suggests that knowledge is good and evil is ignorance is prevalent throughout the Platonic dialogues. For Socrates, bringing light to untruth or injustice through dialogue will eventually destroy ignorance itself and knowledge will prevail. When presented with truth it will in time “smother” ignorance. See for ex: Plato, *Four Texts on Socrates: Apology*, Thomas West and Garry West (trans.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 28a-32e.

<sup>149</sup>Theogony, p. 561 – If we follow Nietzsche’s formula, we might say that Shakespeare performs a transfiguration of values onto the ancient Greek gods.

to Pericles' elation in discovering his daughter not only lives, but has been nobly educated and remains absolutely chaste. The sexual purity Shakespeare makes a great deal of in Marina and Thaisa is the perfect counterpoint to Antiochus' undignified incest. Whereas Antiochus models himself after the classical model of deceitful and lustful Greek and Roman gods, Marina and Thaisa quite explicitly model themselves after the virtues of mercy, charity and moderation.

The divine assistance that guarantees Pericles' reconciliation with his daughter follows from these very same virtues, and so we begin to see an image of the rewards of the just and punishments of the wicked. The punishment that befalls Antiochus and his daughter is similar in form to those we hear about from Zeus, but utterly devoid of deceit or revenge. While for Socrates poets must never say that the gods punish the wretched out of jealousy or revenge, there is a principle of retribution that meets the standards of justice he is after:

If, however, he should say that the bad men were wretched because they needed punishment and that in paying the penalty they were benefited by the god, it must be allowed.<sup>150</sup>

Indeed, Antiochus and his daughter are destroyed by lightning while seated in a chariot; their smiting provokes incredulity in their subjects and news of their incest quickly spreads. King Antiochus is removed from power, his daughter freed from her horrific crimes, and their subjects will ensure new laws protect against such wickedness. The smiting of Antiochus demonstrates the deserts of the unjust: "This king were great, his greatness was no guard, to bar heaven's shaft, but sin had his reward." (ii.iv.1-10)

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<sup>150</sup>Republic, 380b.

The diminution of earthly greatness in favour of the virtues of mercy and familial piety completes itself in the final reconciliation between Pericles and his wife. As Pericles is reunited with his daughter, he begins to hear sounds he calls “the music of the spheres!” (v.i.230) Pericles hears a harmony that he likens to the sound of the heavens themselves, echoing Plato’s descriptions of cosmic music we hear about in both the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*.<sup>151</sup> It is no coincidence that the appearance of the goddess Diana, an almost verbatim depiction of what Socrates has in mind for the rehabilitation of political poetry, occurs alongside Plato’s unification of a musical, orderly and beatific cosmos. While much of the resultant virtues praised by Shakespeare’s gods are what we now call Christian, we are pointed in this emergence not to the New Testament, but to Plato.

The heavenly music puts Pericles to sleep, wherein he sees a vision of Diana who speaks in the language of “crosses” and summons Pericles to her temple in Ephesus. In using the Christian language of the cross alongside Plato’s cosmic music, Shakespeare equates Diana’s compassionate desire to assist Pericles both with Christian revelation and the orderly Platonic cosmos. It is extremely telling that the conflict we see in the Book of Acts between Paul and the believers of Diana also occurs in Ephesus, but is given a different kind of resolution in Shakespeare than in the Bible.<sup>152</sup> In Acts, the matter is left at drawing a distinction between the spiritual riches of Christ and the material riches of Diana’s believers, but in Shakespeare we get no such distinction. The effect of

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<sup>151</sup> Compare *Republic*, 616a-617c and Plato, *Timaeus*, Donald Zeyl (trans) (USA: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 36e, both with this section of *Pericles* as well as *Twelfth Night* (iii.i) and *As You Like It* (ii.vii). The notion of equating an orderly cosmos with music of the spheres had an obviously great impact on Shakespeare’s later writings.

<sup>152</sup> Acts 19:23-35

Shakespeare's play is to break down the difference between Diana and Christ; the resurrection imagery owes as much to "some Egyptian" as it does Jesus.<sup>153</sup> The result is a spiritual movement favouring the absolute superiority of love and fidelity, while preserving the possibility of divine revelation outside the confines of one specific religious tradition. Shakespeare fuses elements of the Abrahamic tradition with the Platonic reforms of Hesiod and Homer.

Indeed, the prohibition by Socrates against gods tricking men in visions and dreams is not broken, because Diana's presence contains no hints of deception or illusion, it is genuine revelation. By blurring the distinction between Christian revelation and the Socratic desire for a rehabilitated assembly of Greek gods, Shakespeare seems to point to the relative unimportance of theology in the face of an awareness of some kind of mysterious cosmological divinity that fundamentally prefers a political world where justice and the merciful virtues are rewarded, and self-interested wickedness is punished. Diana's appearance completes what Gower calls the "restoration" of Pericles and thus defies the usual trappings of tragedy. Without the divine, Pericles would remain a silent wanderer of the seven seas, forever searching through a listless fog in despair over the loss of his wife and daughter.

The restoration of Pericles demonstrates what T.S. Eliot calls Shakespeare's ability to peer through the dramatic actions of men into a spiritual action that transcends

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<sup>153</sup>Cerimon resurrects Thaisa with reference to it being performed before on an Egyptian. (III.II) He could be referring to the sorcerers we hear about in Exodus, or perhaps more overt tales of resurrection as we see in the Egyptian myths of Osiris. Socrates also speaks of a man, Er, who came back to life after having a vision of the afterlife. That resurrection imagery is prevalent in both Christian and Pagan traditions reinforces my emphasis on Shakespeare's unorthodox approach.

them.<sup>154</sup> Aside from Socrates' demands for reformed gods, he also demands the apology of the poets adequately address the issue of the immortality of the soul.<sup>155</sup> As we see in the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, *Crito*, *Phaedo* and elsewhere, Socrates is unusually persistent about the absolute necessity of belief in an immortal soul. If *Hamlet* poses the problem belief in an immortal soul poses for political action, then *Cymbeline* is its antidote.

*Cymbeline* is the story of the semi-mythical king of Britain, set during a particularly tense tribute standoff with Caesar Augustus' Rome. In the background of the play are allusions to Christ's birth, an issue well documented among critics who give serious weight to the political implications of Shakespeare's writing.<sup>156</sup> But at stake is not just a war between states, but a war between the very values that animate those states. *Cymbeline*'s political intrigue would have made it the perfect vehicle for tragedy, but Shakespeare chooses another path. *Cymbeline* parallels *Othello* in many ways, but whereas the Machiavellian Iago succeeds in his destroying the titular relationship, the Italian Iachimo ultimately fails. In a sense, *Cymbeline* shows the defeat of reason at the hands of faith, Imogen's resistance to Iachimo's attempts to use rationality to deceive her demonstrate the possibilities of a strong and protective faith for oneself and country.<sup>157</sup>

The difficulty Iachimo poses is that such faith must be demonstratively superior to

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<sup>154</sup> Charles Warren, *T.S. Eliot On Shakespeare* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987), p.99

<sup>155</sup> *Republic*, 609c. Socrates claims poetry requires an account of an eternal soul that is affected by virtue and vice. It need be shown that justice in and of itself secures rewards. How else can we know something in and of itself unless we peer inside a human subject? This is precisely what imitative poetry can uniquely accomplish and Shakespeare specializes in.

<sup>156</sup> Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare: Vol VIII* (New York: Columbia University Press, 197, p.43 speaks on this noting Holinshed says Christ was born 23 years into *Cymbeline*'s reign in the same breath as the tribute conflict between Rome and Britain. It is likely this is where Shakespeare draws his inspiration for the thematic union of spiritual and political destiny.

<sup>157</sup> Margaret Jones-Davies, 'Cymbeline and the Sleep of Faith' in Dutton, Findlay, Wilson (eds.) *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare* (London: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.198-200 for more on this point.

unfaith; absent the existence of gods who will punish the wicked and praise the just, Imogen's faith is as empty as Iachimo's conceit.

In Act I, Iachimo makes a wager with Posthuous regarding the fidelity of his beloved Imogen. Iachimo's curiosity is raised when he hears a Frenchman recount his earlier encounter with Posthumus:

where each of us fell in praise of our  
country mistresses; this gentleman at that time  
vouching—and upon warrant of bloody  
affirmation—his to be more fair, virtuous, wise,  
chaste, constant-qualified and less attemptable  
than any the rarest of our ladies in France. (i.iv.55-65)

Although the argument is about the virtue of a particular woman, it begins to read as a wager regarding the existence of benevolent gods. Posthumus explicitly describes Imogen's love as a gift from the gods, whereas Iachimo believes no such confidence in faith is possible, and so wagers ten thousand ducats he can successfully seduce Imogen in as little as two guaranteed meetings. The entire scene reads like a Biblical temptation story, particularly the one in Job wherein God brags to Satan saying, "Hast thou not considered my servant Job, how none is like him in the earth? An upright and just man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?"<sup>158</sup>

God and Posthumus' claims parallel that of Socrates, who fiercely resisted any attempt to claim injustice's superiority to justice. The good, the upright, the true, and the virtuous are inherently stronger than the impure, the wicked and the unjust. Iachimo understands Posthumus' confidence to be bound up in his faith, saying "You are afraid, and therein the wiser... I see you have some religion in you, that you fear."(i.iv.145)

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<sup>158</sup>

Job 1:8

Iachimo sees Posthumus' weakness arising out of his strange religion, the content of which Iachimo hopes will inflame and embolden him. Posthumus decries the hugeness of his "unworthy thinking" and agrees to the bet. For Posthumus, not only the grace he claims from the gods is in jeopardy, but also the possibility for divine retribution.

Iachimo's thinking is called unworthy because he does not believe in the possibility of supreme virtue, nor that any human being could be as constant as Imogen. Socrates, inversely, always predicates the argument for immortality on the belief that the soul is constant and can never be destroyed.

Imogen displays the hardness of her faith by resisting Iachimo's temptation, but rational cunning wins the day when he steals her ring, spies on her naked body, and convinces Posthumus of her infidelity. When Posthumus reacts by seeking Imogen's death, we have to remark on the fact Shakespeare never shies away from demonstrating the extreme fragility of love and trust in the face of cunning conspirators. The bond of love is broken by the rational manipulator, but Imogen is quite unlike *Othello's* Desdemona in that she suspects immediately what has happened and disguises herself in order to avoid death. Imogen utilizes a cunning equal to Iachimo's. She demonstrates that one may be pure, faithful, and in love, while also being mindful of concrete political reality.

The moment that immediately precedes the descent of Jupiter into the play is an event of extraordinary consequence. Posthumus, shackled and alone in the confines of his cell, repents of his evil and cries out for the divine grace of death to free him from his earthly crimes:

death, who is the key  
To unbar these locks. My conscience, thou art fetter'd

More than my shanks and wrists: you good gods, give me  
 The penitent instrument to pick that bolt,  
 Then, free for ever! Is't enough I am sorry?  
 So children temporal fathers do appease;  
 Gods are more full of mercy. Must I repent?  
 ...If of my freedom 'tis the main part, take  
 No stricter render of me than my all.  
 I know you are more clement than vile men  
 ... For Imogen's dear life take mine (v.iv.5-25)

Posthumus' repentance is absolute. He believes in benevolent, merciful gods, and in just beings aware of the repentance of man and willing to grant clemency in the face of sin. Posthumus is willing to face the punishment of the afterlife and willingly longs for his just reward. Posthumus does not require the gods to exist in order to have committed such outrages against the woman he loves, but he does require them to exist in order for him to turn his soul around to justice. Repentance is the acceptance of wrongdoing and the desire to see a debt paid, "for Imogen's dear life take mine."

Posthumus' sincere desire for justice awakens the spirits of his ancestors. The ghosts are introduced with "solemn" sounds, and as is typical in Shakespeare, moments of high moral drama are punctuated by musical harmony.<sup>159</sup> The ghosts appear once Posthumus is asleep, and they begin what can only be described as an extended lament. The ghost-father complains that because he died before Posthumus was born, it is the responsibility of the gods to watch out for him, and so the blame for Iachimo's successful deception falls to them. The father asks why Jupiter would allow Iachimo to taint such a "noble heart", but makes no mention of Posthumus' incredible foolishness in making for such an easy victim, nor of his lust for Imogen's innocent blood. His mother, likewise,

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<sup>159</sup>For more on how music speaks to these Renaissance concerns see: Peggy Munoz Simonds, *Myth, emblem, and music in Shakespeare's Cymbeline* (NJ: Associated University Presses, 1992)

complains that because Posthumus was born by C-section he deserves to be pitied by the gods. The ghost family blames the gods for the injuries of man and because their ancestors were great men, their son deserves to have his miseries erased and earthly greatness bestowed upon him.

The spectres' extended lament is a truly pathetic sight. They claim Posthumus deserves help because of his nobility, but their language and excuses are couched entirely in excessive pity. If every man born by caesarean section deserved special attention from the gods, they would be hard pressed to get anything done. The ancestors' appeal to pity is so excessive it becomes absurd. While I think it right to look to the Christian symbolism prevalent throughout *Cymbeline*, especially in light of Elizabethan society's equation of Jupiter's eagle with Christ, it would be a mistake to end the inquiry here.<sup>160</sup> We must ask, further, what is the substance of the Christian allusions in light of the unsympathetic plea from Posthumus' ancestors?

Jupiter responds to the ghosts by descending on an eagle and throwing a thunderbolt towards them, casting them unto their knees in silence:

No more, you petty spirits of region low,  
 Offend our hearing; hush! How dare you ghosts  
 Accuse the thunderer, whose bolt, you know,  
 Sky-planted batters all rebelling coasts?  
 Poor shadows of Elysium, hence, and rest  
 Upon your never-withering banks of flowers:  
 Be not with mortal accidents opprest;  
 No care of yours it is; you know 'tis ours.  
 Whom best I love I cross; to make my gift,  
 The more delay'd, delighted. (v.iv.95-110)

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<sup>160</sup> Simonds, *Myth*, p.295 asserts this with strong evidence from Renaissance ornithographer Aldrovandi.

Jupiter's thunderous response echoes Jehovah's to Job, but adds the necessity of critiquing the more base existence of the ancient, lamentable gods.<sup>161</sup> Jupiter is a being much higher than mere apparitions, and their lament offends the principles of the true gods. True divinity does not lament.<sup>162</sup> While they live in an everlasting garden, they do not exercise higher reason, and thus do not understand the workings of the immortal and omniscient beings that look after mankind. Jupiter claims true gods understand that suffering is a necessary aspect of the human condition. Just as we see in the myths of the afterlife found in both the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, internal weakness in man's soul, or his character, is a justifiable reason for suffering. Suffering for Plato, and so I argue for Shakespeare, is instructional. It is not, as it was for Homer, simply an absurd and necessary condition of human existence.<sup>163</sup> How Posthumus deals with his suffering will make the enjoyment of his "gift" all the more wonderful.

Jupiter refers to Posthumus' "trials" as being well spent, which in context seems to have as much to do with his physical journey as his spiritual one. It is clear that it is his repentance that makes him fit for the gods, and not the pitiful lament of his family. Pity, therefore, is not the final basis upon which Shakespeare's gods operate. If Shakespeare is indeed serious about Jupiter's parallels to Christ, then his God does not

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<sup>161</sup> Job 38 – In the sense that God responds to Job, a deeply pious man, with complete incredulity mirrors the way Jupiter completely dismisses the appeals and laments of Posthumus' ghostly ancestors.

<sup>162</sup> Compare with Plato on lamentation for ex: *Republic*, 387c.

<sup>163</sup> The judgement of the gods on man's interiority is particularly eloquent in the Myth of Er beginning at *Republic*, 614b. Notice that unjust deeds require suffering to cleanse and those who survive are changed through the process. Juxtapose this with, Homer, *The Odyssey*, Richmond Lattimore (trans) (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 11.490 where Achilles' suffering makes him wish he were alive and a slave rather than king of all the afterlife or 11.540-630 where Homer is more interested in depicting the various ways heroes suffer than give us any indication how or why Minos makes the judgements that he does. The suffering is given no larger meaning or purpose.

love pity for pity's sake, but rather freely exercises mercy based on the nobility of men's souls. Posthumus earns his reward through inner triumph. The ghost's pity is an aspect of divinity, but it is but a shadow of the true divine brilliance. Jupiter tells us that Posthumus' sufferings have made him worthy of Imogen's heart.<sup>164</sup> He is the protector of the faithful, but of a kind of faith that can stand on its own merit. Imogen's strength is in her faith, but she can take care of herself. God helps those who help themselves. Personal repentance, or the actualization of the maxim 'know thyself', is a necessary requirement for the benefit of Shakespeare's heavenly hosts.

Before the ghosts vanish, they affirm the superiority of Jupiter's vision of man and heaven. Father ghost says "his ascension is more sweet than our blest fields", implying Jupiter's critique demonstrates his heaven's superiority to the ancient notion of the Elysian fields. (v.iv.115) Coupled with Jupiter's comment, the text implies that for the ancient Greeks, heaven is associated only with a rest from earthly toil, Homer calls it the place "where life is easiest for men."<sup>165</sup> Jupiter's revelation implies truly divine beings do not simply seek endless pleasure, but an acute awareness of human things that include the necessity of suffering. Jupiter's reformation of immortality includes notions of justice that take into account the inner conditions of man, and not simply his reputation, ancestry, or professed faith. Jupiter's isle of the blessed is superior to Elysium because he knows that human beings achieve maximum benefit through the overcoming of trials, not

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<sup>164</sup> I think it very possible Jupiter's preference for trial and suffering is to protect his truly faithful Imogen. I do not think it a coincidence Jupiter descends on the eagle, which is the bird Imogen compares Posthumus to in the first act. I find the argument that the eagle is to be symbolic of Christ plausible, but if we stick to the text itself, the allusion appears more closely related to Imogen herself. Imogen's faith creates the possibility for Posthumus' redemption. He could not be redeemed, or repent, if his love was say Lady Macbeth, or even a timid soul like Desdemona.

<sup>165</sup> Odyssey, 4.560-565.

in their cessation. He rewards Posthumus with the love of Imogen not because he pities him, but because, like Socrates, he has shown an awareness of his own limitations and a genuine thirst for justice. Shakespeare brilliantly utilizes Posthumus in characterizing the difference between ‘greatness’ of reputation and his own true greatness of soul, “Poor wretches that depend on greatness' favour dream as I have done, Wake and find nothing.” (v.iv.130) Posthumus awakes from his own glimpse of immortality and finds everything.

Jupiter ascends back to heaven, but not before he leaves behind a tablet. The tablet affirms Jupiter’s speech in the sense that it provides material confirmation of divine revelation. It was not all ‘just a dream’, Posthumus was not partaking in passionate frenzy, but prophecy.<sup>166</sup> The prophetic tablet informs Posthumus, “when from a stately cedar shall be lopped branches, which, being dead many years, shall after revive, be jointed to the old stock and freshly grow”, his miseries will end and Britain will be renewed in peace. Upon reading the tablet, Posthumus is asked by the jailer if he is ready for death, which he happily replies is long overdue. Although he claims he does not understand the prophecy, he does say it reminds him of his own life. The tablet seems to reinforce Posthumus’ faith in immortality, giving him the confidence to direct himself honourably towards his own death.

The jailer responds to Posthumus’ faith in a just afterlife from the perspective of an ancient tragedian. He claims the comfort of his death is to be found in knowing he no longer has to fear justice; being free of all sensual and earthly debts, he will no longer toil in the contradiction of life that makes us desire everything, yet provide for nothing. The

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<sup>166</sup> Socrates ranks prophecy as the highest kind of divine inspiration because it partakes in a kind of knowing, which poetry and other forms of frenzy lose as they rely increasingly on the senses. For commentary on this matter see: Marsilio Ficino, *Commentaries on Plato: Phaedrus and Ion*, Michael Allen (ed.) (USA: Harvard College, 2008), p.51

arrival of Jupiter's prophecy gives Posthumus a saintly quality that has somehow assured him the importance of his life is grander than this restless gain and loss of material wealth and power. Posthumus says, "I am merrier to die than thou art to live", and we believe him (v.iv.180). Shakespeare makes it absolutely clear, however, that Posthumus does not mean this in the sense that his stoic Caesar, Coriolanus or Brutus would have.

The jailer claims that one can never be merry in approaching death because it is never clear "which way you shall go". The standards of divine justice are as muddled and unclear as the ancient gods themselves. Posthumus, post repentance and divine vision, is absolutely confident he will ascend to heaven. Shakespeare uses the conversation to show just how different Posthumus' faith is than his Roman contemporaries. It affects not only how one lives, but how one dies. Posthumus does not fear death, and so becomes the confident, spiritual and courageous ruler Socrates desired most of all.

In the end, Posthumus recovers a love he thought was dead. Imogen, like Job, never loses her faith in spite of attacks against her. As in the *Republic*, the just soul, despite having the greatest reputation for injustice, demonstrates the superiority of its way of life. Her keen rational instincts allow her to escape death, but it was something quite different that restores her beloved. Shakespeare does not seem to think such faith in the superiority of justice to be simply rational, as we learn from Iachimo that rationality can so often be twisted for self-gain and profit. Such faith requires a connection with something after death; it is only when Posthumus and Cymbeline realize that which they thought was dead still survives that true peace and contentment in their personal and political lives is attained.

It is not necessarily that Shakespeare believes in the literal existence of Diana or Jupiter, but that the principles they represent are protectorates not only of faith, but also of the state. Shakespeare never tells us which afterlife is true, Plato's or the Bible's, but he nevertheless thinks it very important the just life be rewarded. The life of virtue, trust in love, and the superiority of justice are not only principles of religion, but of the good political life as such. If the gods that secure these virtues are killed, so too is the possibility of a state whose end is peace, and not the restless desire for material gain and war. The rarity with which Shakespeare ends a political play with the ascent of peace surely asks for us to inquire as to why peace is possible here, and not in say Hamlet's Denmark.

Hamlet is asked to remain loyal to his ancestry, to his father, and therefore to animate a spirit of revenge totally alien to his otherwise Christian soul.<sup>167</sup> He knows scripture, he knows the new vision of the afterlife, but he cannot square it with his father's demand for revenge. His ghosts are not vanquished, but Posthumus' are. Jupiter's dismantling of the old gods, of the old afterlife, only becomes realized in the birth of a new England. An England that can make peace with Rome, to be sure, but not one on the same spiritual plane. Shakespeare suggests that England can succeed where Rome failed because it has prepared for itself a new spiritual destiny that includes both Christian and Platonic elements. Jupiter and Diana's actions are in accordance with the spirit of the Socratic critique, and therefore form an adequate beginning for an "apology" of poetry that reconciles the needs of successful dramatic imitation with that of life-affirming philosophy. This, admittedly, does little to tell us whether Shakespeare was a

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<sup>167</sup> Paul Cantor, *Hamlet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) devotes his entire book to this thesis.

Protestant, Catholic, humanist, atheist, or otherwise. It does, however, provide sufficient basis to show Shakespeare believed the values and actions we prescribe to gods have a tremendous impact on society itself. Shakespeare not only grasps the essence of the Socratic critique of poetry, but he runs with it, creating images of such complex worth that I hesitate to say too much more than what I have already said, namely that Shakespeare shows how repentance, reconciliation, and love as political principles require poetic accounts of the highest order to ensure their function and protection.

The case of Hymen is different than that of Diana or Jupiter in that *As You Like It* is from an earlier thematic period, and I believe the play gives us good reason to be sceptical as to whether Hymen is not actually somehow a devotee of Rosalind and not the other way around.<sup>168</sup> Whether or not Hymen is a genuine representation of divinity matters less than the demonstrated usefulness of a marriage between theological and political concerns apparent in the resolution of play. Rosalind is nothing if not a genius, perhaps even Shakespeare's master genius, and we should not take for granted that her re-emergence in feminine form at the end of the play is accompanied by the god of marriage in order to settle the "confusion" of the play's proceedings.

Hymen acts as a sort of spell over which the characters can move on from Rosalind's gender bending disguise. That Phebe dismisses the fact she was in love with a woman dressed as a man as easily as "If sight and shape be true, why then, my love

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<sup>168</sup> The coincidences surrounding Hymen's appearance are numerous. Most apparent is Rosalind's claim that she will straighten the situation out and "make all this matter even" (v.iii.18-25), immediately before Hymen appears. She is aware of the miraculous event to come, whereas in *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *Macbeth* the supernatural events are more spontaneous. Still, it does not seem right to call Hymen a "masque" given that the other characters take his appearance quite seriously. See for ex: Dotterer 1989, 146.

adieu”, speaks to the mystical and distracting character of Hymen’s blessing (v.iv.128).

Without recounting the various antics of the play itself, it is enough to say that Hymen’s speech reinforces Shakespeare’s attribution of a serious relationship between the presence of gods and the existence of peace, love and trust within a political community.

Hymen draws an important distinction between “peace” and “confusion” by claiming that her presence is meant to make the meaning of the recent “strange events” clearer. Hymen suggests that if the couples were to look too deeply into the reasons for their marriages, including the reasons why they met and fell in love, that nothing but confusion would result. Reason must be diminished by the power of “wonder”, which for human communities means the blessing of marriage through song and dance. The singing and dancing seem to counter the effects of reason, which might lead us to question exactly how happy the couples will be together in the long run. The lovers in the play, however, do not possess any kind of sceptical attitude toward themselves or their futures. They are under the spell of a divine presence, which, whether real or imagined, acts as supernatural impetus for the keeping of bonds and maintenance of fidelity.

Weddings, Hymen says, are the ornament of divinity by which we know the gods are our kings and benevolent protectors. Shakespeare’s gods enforce love, trust, commitment, and harmony within the context of a benevolent, but absolute rule. Indeed, “Honour, high honour, and renown, to Hymen, god of every town” is as much an ode to the majestic quality of gods as it is the politically transformative effects of marriage. That the lovers will leave Arden and return to the cities of the world is clear, but they take with them lessons gained and faith renewed. It is as though the ceremony itself has a kind of cathartic quality on the problems of the city itself. Marriage is the crux upon

which true bonds of politics are formed and Jacques, the philosopher, excuses himself from the proceedings. It is all too Dionysian for him; for all the virtue and intelligence he displays throughout the play, he is by the end left quiet and alone. The man who can wax-philosophic about the ‘world as a stage’ is the same whose triumph is in sucking “melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs” (ii.v.15). He thinks he has more to learn in an “abandoned cave” than a wedding, while I think Shakespeare makes it abundantly clear that true learning and spiritual cleansing takes place in the merriment of the celebration itself.<sup>169</sup>

In the same order as the divine reinforcement of love and trust in the marriages that resolve *As You Like It* point immediately to the same qualities that need reinforcing in political life, we see in *Macbeth* how brittle these bonds can become. While the question of Hymen’s existence or non-existence does little to dissuade us from the hypothesis that Shakespeare understood the Platonic critique of imitation in his approach to the gods, Hecate and the witches pose a serious and complex challenge to this view. Socrates claims the gods must never be presented as deceitful creatures that seek to do harm to human beings, lest men sympathize with these gods and begin to imitate their wickedness. While deceivers of men like Iago, Iachimo and Caliban are punished for their crimes, we cannot say the same for Hecate or her minions. Hecate appears both below the action of the play and above it. She knows what mortal beings cannot possibly know, but appears to risk nothing in interfering with the lives of humans; her craft does

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<sup>169</sup> Contrast Jacques with Socrates who takes up the flute before his death. The allegory of the cave sees Socrates return for the sake of the others imprisoned, not to be “alone”. Socrates also praises singing at weddings, but warns that poetry must not show gods or heroes using such merriment to deceive the revellers with intent to injure. For ex: Republic 383b.

not appear to be threatened by the actions of men or gods. But is Hecate really evil, or might she too be in some strange way benevolent?

Macbeth presents in many ways the counterpoint to the recognition and celebration scenes of *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *As You Like It* in that the mood and rhythm of the play itself suggest a subterranean darkness.<sup>170</sup> We are given an indication of the depths the play seeks to unveil in Shakespeare's privileging of brutal violence and an absentee divinity in the second scene of the play. After the fight with the rebel Macdonwald, we are told by Duncan, King of Scotland, that Macbeth is a valiant and worthy gentleman because he "unseam him from the navel to the chops" and placed his head upon a pike (i.ii.22). The "good and sturdy" Sergeant claims, "they meant to bathe in reeking wounds, or memorise another Golgotha, I cannot tell" and then promptly passes out. Macbeth kills for pleasure, wearing his opponents' entrails like badges of war. Macbeth so relishes in his brutality that the goodly Sergeant implies he has forgotten Golgotha, the site outside Jerusalem where Christ was crucified.

Shakespeare wants the contrast between the orderly Sergeant and Macbeth to make clear the distinction between a type of violence necessary for war and another sort that far exceeds it. In the Sergeant's eyes, Macbeth plays the part of the Roman executioners, torturing his prey before consuming their lives in the most brutal and bloody way imaginable. The orderly Sergeant pales in comparison to the wartime achievements of a man like Macbeth, but possesses a kind of "goodness" that is entirely alien to Macbeth. The Sergeant was able to rescue the king's son Malcolm, a considerable feat in itself, and so his revulsion at Macbeth's horrors borders on the

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<sup>170</sup> For more on Shakespeare's use of mood and atmosphere to heighten the poetic sense of darkness see: Kranz 2003, 350 ; Stirling 1953, 385.

unspeakable. The indication that Macbeth has somehow forgotten the meaning of Christ's death is an indication by Shakespeare that this play is quite unlike all others that feature divine entities. The love and trust openly honoured by Jupiter, Diana, and Hymen has been displaced. Christ's death, the sacrifice of God for the benefit of man's peace, has for now become something of a foreign concept in Macbeth's Scotland.

So while it is important to keep in mind critical emphasis that has been made on connections between the play and King James' interest in Banquo and demonology, this alone does not explain the complex relationship Shakespeare creates between Macbeth and the supernatural world. J.H. Jack, for example, claims the meaning of *Macbeth* is to be found in James' works on demonology because he argues it is not merely human weakness that endangers the soul, but the direct attack of well-armed agents of Hell.<sup>171</sup> For Jack, when Banquo speaks of a devil, he means the devil of "Christian orthodoxy", and so the story becomes an allegory about the way in which Satan conducts direct attacks on man's soul.<sup>172</sup> But is this really what the play indicates? In *Macbeth* we do not see the Lucifer of the Bible, we see Hecate and her witches. In fact, I argue we do not see a direct attack on Macbeth's soul anywhere in the play. Consider that while the devil of the Bible is imbued with the ability to cause direct harm to a man like Job, the witches specifically say they are unable to do so.<sup>173</sup> It is precisely the human weakness of Macbeth's soul that leads him to succumb to his tyrannical ambition, and it is an ambition Shakespeare indicates he already possesses at the outset of the play. It is also, by way of

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<sup>171</sup> Jack 1955, 176

<sup>172</sup> Ibid 178

<sup>173</sup> The devil very clearly attacks Job directly while the witches claim "Though his bark cannot be lost, yet it shall be tempest-tost", meaning while they cannot impose direct physical harm, they can manipulate man's environment to put him into dangerous situations. They appear only to be able to manipulate certain elements. (i.iii.120)

maintaining our comparison, the ambition Plato feared most of all.<sup>174</sup> Jack is surely right that knowledge of the books Shakespeare read may help us guard against interpretations of the play coloured by modern politics, morality, psychology or theology, but by equating Hecate directly with Satan we may ourselves make this error and either misread the play itself or miss out on other works which may have sculpted Shakespeare's thinking.<sup>175</sup>

In this case, the play itself directs us in some part to the Bible, but also to Homer's *Odyssey* and Plato's *Phaedo*, works Shakespeare appears to have consulted often.<sup>176</sup> When Hecate makes her first appearance in the play, she asks the witches to meet her in the morning at the "pit of Acheron" where Macbeth will "come to know his destiny" (iii.v.15). This scenario closely follows Odysseus' journey, where Circe informs him he must go to Acheron and "dig a pit" for a concoction of honey, wine, and milk, while sacrificing a "barren cow" and two rams. The mixture reminds us of those the witches create in *Macbeth*, and it is likely Shakespeare drew his inspiration from Homer. This is especially likely given Homer's continued referral in this passage to travel by "sea", which the witches claim to be in control of, as well as the warning by Circe that the sacrifices will lead to "numerous souls of the perished dead" surrounding him, and finally a prophecy from Teiresias (who appears in *Julius Caesar*) regarding the future.<sup>177</sup> All of these images are familiar to and appear in *Macbeth*. For Homer, Teiresias' blood

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<sup>174</sup> Republic 568b, Plato says that since the tragic poets "extol tyranny as a condition equal to that of a god" they cannot be admitted into the city. Tyranny is the worst possible life (see also Myth of Er) and so the reformed poet must never claim either that tyrannical men are good or that the gods are tyrannical.

<sup>175</sup> Jack 173-174

<sup>176</sup> We have very good evidence that Shakespeare was reading Plato's *Phaedo* very closely. See for ex: Moore 1943 ; Platt 1979.

<sup>177</sup> *Odyssey* 10.510-540

drinking prophecy reveals the gods' hatred of Odysseus, which can only be amended through the murder of his wife's suitors and numerous extravagant sacrifices. If successful, Odysseus will die but his people will be prosperous, for this is how the "gods spun it".<sup>178</sup>

*Macbeth* draws on this promise, but reforms Homer's insistence on the vengefulness of the gods and the inescapable reality of predestination. Banquo will die and his lineage become prosperous, but Shakespeare suggests Scotland does so through an alliance with the God of love, not revenge. In effect, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* reforms Homer's *Odyssey* according to suggestions on the matter Plato makes in the *Phaedo*. Plato also discusses Acheron, the witches' meeting place, but he introduces several nuances to reform the Homeric version. Socrates says Acheron actually exists as a kind of purgatory where souls are judged:

first they are judged and sentenced...And those who are found to have lived neither well nor ill, go to the Acheron and...there they dwell and are purified, and if they have done any wrong they are absolved by paying the penalty for their wrong doings...But those who appear to be incurable, on account of the greatness of their wrongdoings, because they have committed many great deeds of sacrilege, or wicked and abominable murders, or any other such crimes, are cast by their fitting destiny into Tartarus, whence they never emerge. Those, however, who are curable, but are found to have committed great sins—who have, for example, in a moment of passion done some act of violence against father or mother and have lived in repentance the rest of their lives, or who have slain some other person under similar conditions—these must needs be thrown into Tartarus, and when they have been there a year the wave casts them out...And when they have been brought by the current to the Acherusian lake, they shout and cry out, calling to those whom they have slain or outraged, begging and beseeching them to be gracious and to let them come out into the lake; and if they prevail they come out and cease from their ills, but if not, they are borne away again to Tartarus<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid 11.110-140

<sup>179</sup> Phaedo 113e-114b

In Plato's revision, Acheron is a stage whereupon those who are neither completely good nor evil play out a drama of the soul. The lengths Shakespeare goes to in order to elicit a kind of sympathy and demonstrate Macbeth's humanity means he belongs in precisely such a place. If the soul accepts his wrongdoing, and repents, he has the opportunity to appeal to those he has wronged for absolution. Otherwise, the soul remains in a kind of hell, not only as punishment for their actions, but their internal weaknesses. Macbeth cannot resist the temptation of his 'genius', the witches, (nor his wife) that urge him on to what he himself acknowledges to be terrible crimes. There are importantly no further actions possible once a soul arrives in Acheron, all that remains is an internal process of understanding the self and the repercussions of one's sins against your fellow man, precisely how the finale of *Macbeth* plays out.

While in Homer's account Teiresias demands Odysseus murder the suitors, neither Hecate nor the witches make any such demands on Macbeth. They offer a prophecy of the future that Macbeth himself admits may just as likely come about naturally, or through genuine succession, than through murder and usurpation. Indeed, Banquo remarks to Macbeth after he first hears the prophecy, "Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?"(i.iii.51) Macbeth has already thought about murdering his friend the king; his bloody ambition oversteps what he himself knows to be political and moral boundaries. In this way, the witches must be understood to be trafficking with human affairs only in so far as they are, if we like, supernatural psychologists. The darkness of their speech and even the very atmosphere Shakespeare invokes makes it perfectly clear these are judgemental and temptuous beings, but they show no hatred towards Macbeth whatsoever. They are mischievous, but never vengeful.

The important decisions in Shakespeare are always human decisions; they derive from the very firstlings of human thought.

That the witches' function is primarily to tempt Macbeth into doing what he already desires is demonstrative of precisely the same movement we see in Plato's revision of the Homeric tale. The judges in Plato's image peer into the human soul for evidence of justice, just as the witches do here. Hecate claims she practices an "art", and her admonishment of the witches for their mediocrity suggests a template upon which such an art is to be judged (iii.v.10). That template appears to be the standards of justice itself, which Macbeth has broken and makes no attempt to amend. Macbeth meets the witches in Acheron, the place of judgement, and deems himself unworthy of peace or mercy. He goes on to suffer for precisely the reasons Plato outlines in the *Phaedo*, which are magnified further in the myth that concludes the *Republic*. Macbeth is astutely aware of that 'life to come', and his desire to leap over the repercussions of judgement proves impossible. We do not see the other side of the Platonic image in *Macbeth*, that being the divine reward for the just soul, but we hear about its possible existence in England's King, as well as in Malcolm's decision to 'tempt' Macduff by feigning tyrannical ambition.<sup>180</sup>

Macbeth completely ignores the repercussions of justice that he himself agrees will exist in the life to come. He does not even try to deny the existence of an immortal

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<sup>180</sup> Malcolm tests Macduff (iv, iii) in order to ensure it is punishment for tyranny and the liberation of his home the 'rebels' long for, and not simply power for its own sake. It is clear he equates true justice with revelation when he feigns tyranny in heavenly terms: "had I power, I should pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, uproar the universal peace, confound all unity on earth." In the same scene we learn of the English King's ability to appeal to heaven in order to heal the sick, which both the doctor and Malcolm attest to. The King's ability is said also to serve a prophetic function, implying the virtues of England in caring for the sick make it destined to succeed in God's eyes where Macbeth's cruel Scotland shall surely fail.

soul. We receive no definitive confirmation of the afterlife in any of Shakespeare's plays, but its presence haunts his entire corpus. We continually see and hear about the appearance of ghosts, but this is as close as Shakespeare ever comes. Judgement always takes place in this life, within the human drama of the play itself, but the existence of the witches and the allusion to Acheron obviously lends itself to spiritual interpretation.

Hecate's admonishment of the witches and the subsequently 'improved' prophecy under her guidance is further evidence of Shakespeare's awareness of the Platonic critique of the Homeric worldview. Socrates argues that Homer's propensity to show the gods quarrelling can have the dangerous effect of increasing young men's desires not only for conflict simply, but specifically civil strife and internal dissent.<sup>181</sup> If the gods fight amongst their own families and communities, then so too will men. In *Macbeth*, we are given the unique predicament of the goddess Hecate disapproving of the actions of her underlings, the witches. How do Shakespeare's gods, the most terrible he depicts, deal with their problems?

Hecate arrives on the scene and immediately the witches know she is angry. Where in Homer we might expect some terrible curse or bondage in retribution, Hecate simply claims she has good "reason" to be upset. The witches have not been acting in accordance with the "glory" of her art, they have been acting "saucy and overbold". These are immoderate witches. More than anything, Hecate wishes she had been consulted on the matter, for the entire episode would have been avoided if they but realized Macbeth is not truly worthy of their charms:

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<sup>181</sup> Republic 378c, "Above all...it mustn't be said that gods make war on gods" because guardians and lovers of the city must think it shameful to easily anger and quarrel amongst one another.

And, which is worse, all you have done  
 Hath been but for a wayward son,  
 Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,  
 Loves for his own ends, not for you. (iii.v)

Hecate, the “close contriver of all harms”, admonishes the witches for trafficking with Macbeth because he is an insolent, violent and self-interested soul! In caring only for himself, he shows disrespect to the gods. Where we could easily expect Zeus to laud Macbeth for the very same properties of wrath and vengeance, Hecate emphasizes love as the basis for divine respect.

Because Macbeth does not love in a noble fashion, in a fashion fit for the divine, he is unworthy of the rather straightforward prophecies the witches have hitherto provided. Hecate is going to “amend” the situation by giving to Macbeth the sort of prophecy he deserves. She will show them how to conjure up spirits of the dead that:

As by the strength of their illusion  
 Shall draw him on to his confusion:  
 He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear  
 He hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear:  
 And you all know, security  
 Is mortals' chiefest enemy. (iii.v.32)

Hecate will make amends by crafting a prophecy deserving of Macbeth’s wicked nature. She will now try to “confuse” him, and if her reading of Macbeth is accurate, he will reject the consequences of the actions he has instigated, turn a blind eye towards death, and instil in himself an optimism that is totally alien to the reality at hand. Hecate claims wisdom, grace, and fear are appropriate foundations upon which knowledge of the good and true are possible, and that Macbeth’s rejection of these principles will lead quickly to his undoing. Hecate juxtaposes these principles with Macbeth’s (and perhaps

modernity's) errant commandment, that security is the thing most needful for man and society. His insistence on security, which Hecate implies is unwise folly, will lead him to an undignified death that parallels his undignified life. The indignity of Macbeth's existence is accompanied by his continued insistence on extended lament, which Socrates tells us is perfectly admissible so long as it is only done to show the inferiority of wicked men.<sup>182</sup>

Lest we be too harsh on Macbeth, we should not deny the existence of a certain kind of self-awareness that grows within him, but never reaches the plane of genuine repentance. We sympathize with Macbeth, but not enough to pardon him for his sins. He does not call out to those he has wronged or ask for their forgiveness. The acceptance he gains at the end of the play for his wrongdoing is the beginning of the movement towards absolution, but we do not see it within the play itself. Shakespeare wants us to think about immortality, justice, and the theological-political problem, but he turns down the temptation to cement his inclinations into any kind of definite statement. Hell might exist in the world to come, but if it doesn't, it certainly exists on earth. More than anyone else in the Shakespearean corpus, Macbeth's own realization and acceptance of his wrongdoing follows the Socratic allowance for punishment, "that in paying the penalty they were benefited by the god".<sup>183</sup>

Socrates claimed philosophy was 'preparation for death', and this is precisely what Hecate tells us Macbeth ignores.<sup>184</sup> Coincidentally, his scorn for Athens is matched only by his distaste of "grace", of Jerusalem. As Macbeth will later confirm, he no longer even tastes fear, the most basic of human instincts. He is an unnatural beast. The evil

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<sup>182</sup> Republic 387c.

<sup>183</sup> As in *Pericles* see note 5.

<sup>184</sup> Phaedo 79c-81a

Hecate sees in Macbeth's soul is therefore an evil of ignorance, of absence, of irrationality and unreason.<sup>185</sup> Knight is surely right when he claims that Macbeth's "acceptance" of all that he has done is itself a kind of spiritual achievement, but Shakespeare appears perfectly in line with Plato in showing that acceptance of violent error and nihilism is only the first step in Acheron. The internal movement toward repentance is also a movement towards justice. Man must not only accept his spiritual deprivation, he must make a positive movement away from it. This is what Hecate knows Macbeth is not ready to do, and so for his ignorant cowardice he will suffer.

That Hecate claims she will sow "confusion" in Macbeth's soul certainly seems to break the letter of the Socratic critique against displaying gods who purposely attempt to deceive human beings. But as we see in the myths of the afterlife found in both the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, internal weakness in man's soul, or his character, is a justifiable reason for human suffering. Suffering for Plato, and so I argue for Shakespeare, is instructional. It is not, as it was for Homer, simply an absurd and necessary condition of human existence.<sup>186</sup> Macbeth fails to resist the temptation that arises from his lust for power and prestige and suffers greatly in his continued inability to correct his ways. The appearance of Hecate's 'reformed' apparitions cements Macbeth's complete indifference to anyone but himself. The apparitions yield to Macbeth's desire for truth and show him an image of a future prosperity, a line of successful kingship from Banquo's lineage that stretches for centuries (iv.i.115). Macbeth refers to it as a "wicked" sight because it

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<sup>185</sup> Knight 1947, 82.

<sup>186</sup> Consider for example *Odyssey* 11.490 where Achilles' suffering makes him wish he were alive and a slave rather than king of all the afterlife or 11.540-630 where Homer is more interested in depicting the various ways heroes suffer than give us any indication how or why Minos makes the judgements that he does. The suffering is given no larger meaning or purpose.

appears to “stretch out to the crack of doom”.<sup>187</sup> The image of a peaceful and prudent statecraft that can secure the prosperity of Macbeth’s people until the end of the world repulses him, and Shakespeare seems to suggest such revulsion need be reviled not only by peaceable human beings, but even gods and goddesses that dabble in dark and mysterious arts.

In a play as dark and damning as *Macbeth*, “love” is the missing ascendant quality. That it is Hecate who draws this to our attention surely undermines any argument that she represents pure unadulterated evil or is in some way superfluous to the play itself. Hecate accuses Macbeth of precisely the same sin as the goodly Seargeant that opens the play, he has forgot the meaning of sacrifice and suffering. Hecate’s actions are in accordance with the spirit of the Socratic critique, and therefore form an adequate basis for an “apology” of poetry that reconciles the needs of successful dramatic imitation with that of life-affirming philosophy. Such is the case in Shakespeare’s parallel images of reconciliation, repentance, and marriage-blessing that we see in his use of Diana, Jupiter and Hymen. Shakespeare not only grasps the essence of the Socratic critique of poetry, but he runs with it, creating images of complex worth that demonstrate how Shakespeare shows reconciliation and love as political principles which require poetic accounts of the highest order to ensure their function and protection.

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<sup>187</sup> The Biblical reference accords well with the judging of souls image Shakespeare alludes to in the Platonic context. Nowhere better than Matthew 12.36 “But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof at the day of judgment.”

## Chapter 6: Shakespeare's Debt to Plato in

### *Timon of Athens*

*Timon of Athens* is a rather curious 'problem-play' that has seen its fair share of divergence over interpretive issues, especially when it comes to the title character. Unlike most interpretive strategies, I argue *Timon of Athens* is best understood as a Shakespearean case study in Platonic misanthropy. In fact, Timon's complete contempt for humanity appears purposely modelled after the various ways in which Socrates treats the subject. In *Timon of Athens*, however, Socrates is absent, replaced by what Shakespeare has called a 'churlish philosopher'. If Socrates is a civil, or political, philosopher, then Shakespeare directs us to see Apemantus as in some sense his philosophic foil. Timon does not turn to misanthropy after his truly noble and philanthropic efforts are thwarted, but because he is supremely overconfident in the trust he places in his circle of 'friends'. I will make the case that Shakespeare was not only reading Plato, but the entire meaning of the play is a kind of accompaniment to Socratic philosophy. Any interpretation of the play that disconnects itself from Shakespeare's Platonic source misunderstands the extent to which *Timon of Athens* mirrors Socratic warnings against flattery, sophistry and uncivil philosophy.

The key to understanding *Timon of Athens* does not lie in a minute textual allusion or in an overly complicated interpretive strategy, but rather on understanding

Shakespeare's uncanny ability to transform Platonic wisdom into a dramatic narrative.

We know Shakespeare had been reading the *Phaedo* from the uncanny similarities between Falstaff and Socrates' death scenes.<sup>188</sup> It is therefore surprising that scholars have not connected *Timon of Athens* specifically with this Platonic dialogue, given that Socrates' description of misanthropy reads like crib-notes to the play itself:

Misanthropy arises from the too great confidence of inexperience; you trust a man and think him altogether true and sound and faithful, and then in a little while he turns out to be false and knavish; and then another and another, and when this has happened several times to a man, especially within the circle of his most trusted friends, as he deems them, and he has often quarrelled with them, he at last hates all men, and believes that no one has any good in him at all.<sup>189</sup>

Shakespeare's play mirrors Socrates' description of misanthropy *nearly word for word*.

The play demonstrates each stage of the above movement, right down to a similarity in language. At least part of Shakespeare's brilliance lies in his ability to demonstrate this teaching and by wondering what Athens would look like in a dialogue where Socrates is dramatically and culturally absent.

Like Bloom, Alvis, Parker, Rowe, and others, I have made a case for Shakespeare having consulted the Platonic dialogues as a crucial source in the development of his own work.<sup>190</sup> In addition to what I suggest in relation to the *Phaedo*, Gray's work has done an

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<sup>188</sup> Moore appears to be the first to have noticed this link, whereas Mcfarland and Platt have interesting ideas about what this means for the character and the play: John Robert Moore, "Shakespeare's Henry V" *Explicator* 1 (1943); Michael Platt, "Falstaff in the Valley of the Shadow of Death," *Interpretation: Journal of Political Philosophy* 8 (1979); Thomas Mcfarland, *Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972)

<sup>189</sup> Plato, *Five Great Dialogues: Phaedo*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. (Toronto: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1942) pp.125.

<sup>190</sup> Alvis, West and Bloom do not do significantly more than allude to Plato as a source, whereas Parker and Rowe go into great textual detail to demonstrate the link: John Alvis and Thomas West, *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*. (Carolina Academic Press, 1981), pp.7; Allan Bloom, *Shakespeare's Politics*. (Basic Books, 1964), pp.83; Barbara Parker, *Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Rome: a political study of the Roman works*. (Newark: U of Delaware, 2004); M.W. Rowe, "Iago's Elenchus: Shakespeare, *Othello*, and the

admirable job of making the case for Shakespeare having studied the *Symposium* and adapted Diotima's ladder into his sonnets.<sup>191</sup> The strength of a reading of Shakespeare from the perspective of political philosophy is apparent, however, when one considers Gray's argument that Shakespeare departs from Plato by incorporating a kind of chaotic element into love's ascent that is totally lacking in the account we hear from Diotima. Gray's argument hinges on the assumption that Plato's view of love is strictly synonymous with Diotima's. When one considers the *Symposium* in its entirety, however, we see that Diotima's speech is but one of many given at the overnight party, and its retelling is at least five times removed from participants who were actually present. If we consider the dramatic context of the dialogue, we see that the orderly ascension of love found in Diotima's speech is itself countered by a chaotic whirlwind of an entrance; one cannot understand the teaching of the *Symposium* without considering to what purpose Plato has Alcibiades completely disrupt the party. By examining the description of misanthropy in the *Phaedo* as well as the action of the *Symposium* as a whole, we will put ourselves in a much better position to see how Shakespeare adopts the teaching of the dialogues into his plays.

Having suggested that Diotima's ladder is not, in itself, Plato's complete teaching on the matter, we are in a better position to counter Marxist claims that Timon's view of gold and wealth is synonymous with Shakespeare's. According to Marx, the theme of *Timon of Athens* hinges on Shakespeare's depiction of the corrupting influence of money

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Platonic Inheritance" in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010)

<sup>191</sup> Nuttall mentions a possible connection with the *Symposium* but does not follow up on the assumption. While in my view Gray misreads Plato, he does a good job showing the textual allusions present in the sonnets. Ronald Gray. "Will in the Universe: Shakespeare's Sonnets, Plato's *Symposium*, Alchemy and Renaissance Neoplatonism" *Shakespeare Survey* 59 (2006); A.D. Nuttall, *Timon of Athens*. (Toronto: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) pp.79.

and usury.<sup>192</sup> But we must ask, is it the gold itself that has corrupted Timon, or a certain defect in his character that prevents him from understanding its role in a healthy and happy life? Marx claims that Shakespeare presents money as the “visible divinity” that confounds and distorts all things and as the “common whore” of the people.<sup>193</sup> And yet it is not Shakespeare who presents this view at all, but rather a ravaged and misanthropic Timon. Derek Cohen's book *The Politics of Shakespeare* similarly argues that the obsessive concern of the characters in *Timon of Athens* is “having and not having money”.<sup>194</sup> If one reads Timon's speeches carefully, however, we see his chief desire is not money for its own sake, but rather as a means for procuring his particular vision of love and friendship. His eventual poverty even excites Timon because it will allow him to call on his 'close friends' for support. In my view, Shakespeare goes out of his way to show us that it is not money that has corrupted Timon, but rather that his character is corrupted by a sophistry that places entirely too much confidence in inexperience.

In this regard we are much closer to Dr. Johnson who taught, “The catastrophe affords a very powerful warning against ostentatious liberality, which scatters bounty, but confers no benefits, and buys flattery but not friendship.”<sup>195</sup> Although he may not have known it, Johnson's analysis understands the play in relation to the concerns of its source, the Platonic dialogues. There may be merit to what Marx and company are getting at, but it cannot be understood when divorced from the corruption of character that allows money to become the confounding and temptuous object *par excellence*. To build on Dr.

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<sup>192</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977) pp122-123 ; For a better discussion of Marxist inspired interpretations see: Rolf Soellner, *Timon of Athens*. (Ohio State University Press, 1979) pp226.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, p.122

<sup>194</sup> Derek Cohen, *Politics of Shakespeare*. (New York: St Martins Press, 1993)pp.89

<sup>195</sup> Samuel Johnson and Arthur Murphy, *The Works of Samuel Johnson*. (Dearborn Publishing, 1832) pp.489

Johnson's analysis, we might add that the tragedy is not simply Timon's, but all of Athens. The Athenian world Shakespeare presents us with is filled with empty flattery and corrupted flatterers. The presence of a plethora of unnamed guests and senators suggests a systemic corruption of Athenian society. Most interesting of all, however, is what is noticeably absent in Athens. Socrates is missing. Plato's Socrates says to Alcibiades "I will never desert you, if you are not spoiled and deformed by the Athenian people".<sup>196</sup> *Timon of Athens* begins by showing that these conditions have been met, and Socrates is nowhere to be found. What is the relationship between the absence of Socratic philosophy and Timon's love of flattery?

It should be evident from the opening of the play that Shakespeare has in mind a kind of unhealthy version of Plato's banquet.<sup>197</sup> The host for Plato's *Symposium* is Agathon, a hospitable nobleman and tragic poet of Athens. *Timon of Athens* likewise, begins its action at a banquet held by a famous Athenian nobleman who by the time of his death resembles something of a tragic poet himself.<sup>198</sup> The *Symposium* features a lawyer, doctor, rhetorician, two poets and a philosopher, while *Timon of Athens* features a poet (two if we include Timon), a painter, a merchant, a jeweller, a philosopher and various noblemen. Like the *Symposium*, *Timon's* party includes explicitly unnamed lords who do not speak, but are merely present at the table. Both accounts prominently feature Alcibiades arriving late to the banquet in quite spectacular fashion. Alcibiades enters *Timon's* banquet to the sound of trumpets playing and a messenger announcing his and

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<sup>196</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades I and II*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. (Echo Library, 2006) pp.42

<sup>197</sup> Socrates actually says that those who have no experience of prudence and virtue are usually associated with feasts "and the like". Socrates emphasis on "no experience" here parallels the emphasis of the Phaedo on "inexperience". Plato. *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom. (USA: Basic Books, 1991) 586a

<sup>198</sup> Leo Paul S. De Alvarez, "Timon of Athens" in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1981) pp.175

some twenty companions presence, while he enters Agathon's with similar pomp, yelling loudly and being carried in by a "large party" and a flute-girl.<sup>199</sup> The similarities in the entrances are uncanny. Alcibiades is presented in both accounts as a kind of opposite to Falstaff, 'first to the fray, last to the feast'.

Aside from the similar physical setting of the two banquets, there are also important philosophic parallels. In the *Symposium*, we are privy to a conversation that revolves entirely around praising and honouring love (*Symposium*, 177a-177d). In *Timon of Athens*, the entire first banquet and main thrust of the play's action revolves around praising and honoring Timon. In both instances we are also confronted with a character that criticizes the discussions on the basis of their excessive flattery; Apemantus' first words accuse Timon's guests of being dishonest knaves, precisely the word Socrates uses in the *Phaedo* to describe the beginning of the movement toward misanthropy (*Timon*, I.I.183). We may also note here that Plutarch characterizes Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades as an attempt to ward off the excessive flattery of the Athenians and that the main factor in Alcibiades rather frequent departures from Socrates were due entirely to his propensity to "abandon himself to flatterers".<sup>200</sup> That we find Shakespeare's Alcibiades surrounded by flatterers, then, should not surprise us. Plato, too, speaks of this danger most eloquently when he has his Socrates say to Alcibiades, "...for the danger which I most fear is that you will become a lover of the

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<sup>199</sup> *Timon of Athens* I.I.242 and *Symposium* 212d. We may also note Alcibiades is the only one to be accompanied by a woman in the *Symposium* and is the only man seen with a woman in *Timon of Athens*. Both the flute-girl and the 'prostitutes' are of questionable character to those around them. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. (Philadelphia: The Blakiston Company, 1936) ; Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. (USA: Hackett Publishing, 1989)

<sup>200</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. A.H.Clough (Philadelphia: John D. Morris and Company, 1882) pp.376-378.

people and will be spoiled by them. Many a noble Athenian has been ruined in this way.”<sup>201</sup> The Socratic danger applies as much to Alcibiades as it does to Timon, the crucial difference being that the corruption of a captain leads to despotic power, while the corruption of the poet leads to misanthropy or nihilism. Shakespeare seems to recall the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo* together as if to say that the false trust that arises from a group of insincere friends is particularly alluring among nobles who have nothing better to do but spend their time attending luxurious dinner parties.

The opening of the play demonstrates the fallen condition of philosophy and an Athens that is corrupt in all corners of the city. Allan Bloom's remark about the Roman plays works just as well in Athens, “The more corrupt the audience, the more brilliant the rhetoric.”<sup>202</sup> The poet's simple greeting to the painter of “how goes the world?” is met with “It wears, sir, as it grows”(Timon, I.I.1-5). The poet knows precisely what the painter means; they share a similarly sceptical worldview. The poet is not entirely satisfied by communicating this simple pessimism, however, for he has a curiosity that pushes him to know precisely what strange rarity has made for them this corrupted state. The poet's dissatisfaction with conventional answers about the state of the world is, in a sense, the beginning of philosophy. But instead of thinking the matter through or presenting a question to the painter, he abruptly changes the subject by drawing attention to the merchant across the room. He is a poor, unreflective poet. He does not know how to use his philosophic nature and so the conversation quickly shifts back to conventional appearances and gossip. The poet as presented here is precisely the opposite of the poet Shakespeare, who more than any other explicitly explores the question of the city's

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<sup>201</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades I and II*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. (Echo Library, 2006) pp.42

<sup>202</sup> Bloom, A. (1964) *Shakespeare's Politics*. Chicago: Basic Books. P.83

corruption. That the merchant and jeweller are similarly fallen is shown by the sharp distinction between how the merchant characterizes the nobility of the jeweller and the actual object of his fascination. The merchant calls the jeweller an “incomparable man” with an “untirable and continue goodness” to which the jeweler responds by saying “I have a jewel here” (Timon, I.I.11). The Athenians are not marked simply by affection for material riches, but also by an incredibly sophisticated, if vacuous, rhetoric. That there is not a single truly virtuous character in the play is coupled with the fact that every character seems capable of beautiful and eloquent speeches. The general character of Athenian man seems to be an acquired disposition towards sophistry. These are Timon’s ‘friends’.

The scepticism we see in the opening scene is reflective of the philosophy of most sophists, whose tragic relativism stresses that the outcome of competition and strife is ultimately more important than the content of the issues themselves.<sup>203</sup> Indeed, as the poet and painter jostle with one another over the relative merits of their professions, the painter's work is described as a “mocking” of life and capable of tutoring nature, for “artificial strife” lives in his painting more vivid than in life itself. The competitive nature of their argument recalls the *Protagoras* and *Euthydemus*, where sophistry is likened to combat by Socrates accusing the sophists of using words as weapons, linking

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<sup>203</sup>A fully developed account of the sophists is impossible here, but the illusions to competition, the pre-eminence of convention and the tragic world view (especially Homer) are developed well in: John Poulakos, *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece*. (University of South Carolina Press, 1995) ; Waller Newell. *The Erotics of Statecraft in Platonic Political Philosophy*. (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) pp.42

their essentially competitive outlook with a view of nature bound up in strife.<sup>204</sup> Timon lives in an environment hostile to genuine self-reflection.

The poet's use of 'mocking' suggests the very opposite of reverence, an imitation that does not look towards the best things in life, but rather treating life with insincerity and scorn. In so far as the portrait is said to possess the ability to tutor nature, we see the ascendancy of *nomos* (convention, art) over *physis* (nature). Man, indeed, is the measure of all things.<sup>205</sup> The painter's art, self-admittedly a counterfeit vision of reality, teaches man what is natural. But who are the students? Shakespeare does not even allow the poet to finish his sophistic exposition before calling for the entrance of the Athenian senators to the dinner party. The political men of Athens enter, on cue, precisely as the poet extols the painter's ability to teach nature what is true. The students are the rulers of Athens, and they have been thoroughly persuaded by a *nomos* that is ignorant to all that might be noble about nature. Timon, the host for the party, is the center around which all this sophistry moves.

That it is a poet and painter discussing art's powerful tools of insincerity recalls Socrates discussion with Adeimantus regarding the poet weaving "false tales" and the painter's dangerous ability to distort images through his art (Republic, 377d-e). But what kind of falsity and distortion is at stake? What is the content of their teaching of nature? Shakespeare gives us an indication of the general sense of Athenian art when he has the poet describe his work in essentially Homeric terms, "Fortune, in her shift and change of mood, Spurns down her late beloved" (Timon, I.I.87-90). That the painter is eager to

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<sup>204</sup> Socrates calls their art "eristic" and the Greek for strife is "eris": Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. C.C.W. Taylor. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 335a and 339e ; Plato, *Euthydemus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. (Maryland: Serenity Publishers, 2009) pp.9,24

<sup>205</sup> For more on this connection see: Michael Nill, *Morality and self-interest in Protagoras, Antiphon, and Democritus*. (BRILL, 1985) pp.4

brag that he can show such a message in his moral paintings far better than the poet can is indicative of a general agreement regarding the content and aim of Athenian art; their disagreement centers only on whose demonstration of the tragic view is superior. The emphasis on fortune's inevitable destruction of the happiness of man is a clear representation of the view of the pre-Socratic tragic poets. The scene does not foreshadow or symbolize the inevitability of Timon's downfall because it is in fact not the gods or fortune that brings about his failure, but rather his complete inability to manage his household and deal with crisis.<sup>206</sup>

Timon, does, however, believe in the sophistic/tragic view that the artisans present as he says upon receiving the gift that it “is almost the natural man: For since dishonour traffics with man's nature, He is but outside” (Timon, I.I.160-165). Timon equates natural man with dishonour. It is this dishonour, presumably, whose trafficking with human nature pre-empts the gods of fortune to dispel all human happiness. Shakespeare is in tune with the failure of this kind of poetry as well, as Timon's indication that “He is but outside” seems to distance himself from any moral learning possible from the art itself. Shakespeare seems to be saying here that whatever the positive affect tragic poetry had on the ancient Athenians, it no longer has any corrective clout. Timon is precisely the rich, hubristic nobleman this art is intended to correct, yet it fails entirely. It is no coincidence that the opening scene's depiction of the corruption of Athens is centered around a sophistic discussion; Shakespeare seems to agree with Plato that the widespread

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<sup>206</sup> Soellner and others argue that Shakespeare includes this discussion because the action is “under the aegis of the goddess Fortuna and invites the reader or spectator to view it from a pessimistic perspective”(Soellner, 143). And yet is the play not rather unlike the ancient Greek tragedies? The gods do not cause Timon's downfall, he does. Athens, as a city, certainly believes itself to be directed by the goddess Fortuna, but nowhere does Shakespeare seem to be saying this is actually true. It is rather the city believing this that seems to speed up its downfall.

dissemination of their views can cause their listeners to act in incoherent ways with politically disastrous consequences.<sup>207</sup> It is worth noting that the poet and painter seem absolutely disinterested in using their cautionary warning for any corrective purpose whatsoever. Shakespeare shows that not only is their art flawed, but so are they. That the poet and painter believe themselves to be on the same social status as the jeweller and merchant reveals the degradation of their professions. They are not at the party to administer medicine for the soul, but rather to give and receive flattery and gifts.

If Shakespeare is indeed alluding to the problem with the sophistic understanding of nature as understood by Plato, then he must also point to the solution, or at least one possible solution to Athenian corruption. What is the Socratic corrective? In the *Symposium* we see Socrates offer a sharp rebuke to Agathon's speech, the eloquence of which he attributes to the tutelage of Gorgias, the famous sophist (*Symposium*, 198c). Socrates correction of Agathon is made first by way of ironic flattery. He claims to be tongue-tied from the "beauty and variety" of the speech and at how "wonderful" the poetic verse was. It is only after considerable flattery that Socrates allows himself even the gentlest criticism of the night's speeches. Instead of being about the pursuit of the truth about love, Socrates asks whether the true aim was not to apply love:

the grandest and the most beautiful qualities, whether he actually has them or not. And if they are false, that is no objection; for the proposal, apparently, was that everyone here make the rest of us think he is praising Love-and not that he actually praise him...And your praise did seem beautiful and respectful (*Symposium* 198d-199a).

We must note that Socrates both prefaces and concludes his criticism with flattery of his subject. His corrective philosophic medicine is coated with the soothing nicety of praise.

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<sup>207</sup> Poulakos, John. (1995) *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece*. University of South Carolina Press. P.80

He often goes out of his way to ensure his opposition thinks of him as a “friend”.<sup>208</sup>

From the position of the Socratic philosopher, change in the individual soul is impossible without a 'political' approach to the subject. Once they feel they are respected and loved by Socrates, they are much more open to engaging in his corrective dialectic.

That Socrates does not altogether dismiss the use of rhetoric for his larger goal of improving men's souls is of primary importance when considering the action of *Timon of Athens*.<sup>209</sup> The dramatis personae Shakespeare provides for the play does not indicate the presence of a philosopher simply, but rather of a “churlish philosopher”. If Socrates is the model par excellence of the political philosopher, what does this make the character of Apemantus? As a churlish philosopher, he is rude, unpleasant and uncivil. Does the character of the philosopher have any bearing on the action of the play?

Apemantus, like Socrates, allows the other guests to get situated before he arrives at the party. Once situated, Apemantus insults his host by claiming he is virtuous because he is nothing like Timon. If recognizing likeness in another is the beginning of friendship, Apemantus is strikingly alone. Having called the guests villains and insulted the host, Apemantus turns his wrath towards the poet, whom he calls a “liar” because he has represented Timon as a worthy fellow, when in fact he is not. Finally, the entrance of Alcibiades allows Apemantus to remark that there is now a “small love” present in the party. Apemantus reserves his only compliment of the party for Alcibiades, and he does so through the use of a specifically erotic comment. Apemantus’ odd remark recalls Alcibiades’ relationship with the philosopher of the *Symposium*; although there is no doubt the scene would look much different were it Socrates and not Apemantus present,

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<sup>208</sup> *Symposium* 199d ; *Republic* 336e

<sup>209</sup> Consider *Gorgias* 503a-b where Socrates seems to hint at himself as possessing the only truly good form of rhetoric: Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987)

the erotic indicator serves as an impetus to examine the true difference between the philosophers.

First, we will note that Socrates refers to himself as the wisest man in Athens and as the only contemporary Athenian who practices true politics.<sup>210</sup> Like Apemantus, he sets himself apart from all other Athenians. When Socrates begins to question Agathon, he refuses to give a speech that shares any likeness with those that have come before and the great theme of the second and third books of the *Republic* deals with the great lies the poets have told about what constitutes greatness in men (Symposium, 199b). Apemantus expresses precisely these concerns. Alcibiades' entrance in the *Symposium*, too, is characterized by a passionate outburst of love, although the Platonic dialogue represents this love as reciprocal, whereas Shakespeare does not (Symposium, 213d). These similarities are not simply coincidental. We see Shakespeare crafting an image of the philosopher that is similar to Socrates in content, but divorced from him in style. Apemantus' constant interjections into the play constitute an attempt to reform the souls of the Athenians without any political knowledge of how to go about doing so. The philosopher is completely ignored. What Shakespeare gives us is an image of a philosopher unable to affect any change whatsoever within the souls of the Athenians or the soul of the city itself. As it is with the division in the *Republic*, the corrupted soul of the city stands parallel to the corrupted souls of its citizens (Republic, 434d). Socrates' claim that he is the only one who truly practices politics raises an interesting question for the play, what happens to politics and philosophy when Socrates is no longer present?

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<sup>210</sup> Plato. *Dialogues of Plato: Apology*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. (New York: Random House, 1937) 19e-21a and Gorgias 521e

Apemantus ends his mocking of the poet by lamenting “Heavens, that I were a lord!”(Timon, I.I.220-230). Taking the form of a Socratic dialogue, Timon asks Apemantus what he would do if he were in charge of the polis. The question from Timon again recalls the *Republic*, where Socrates building of the city in speech culminates in his vision of the philosopher king. For Socrates, there can be no rest from the ills of the city until “philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs adequately philosophize”(Republic, 473d). Apemantus' answer is radically different, however, for he attempts to cut the discussion off entirely by saying his city would be different only in so far as he would now hate himself with all his heart instead of others.<sup>211</sup> Apemantus, it seems, cannot be compelled to rule even in speech. Despite Apemantus' attempts to get away from the conversation, to spurn his responsibility to the city as philosopher, Timon persists in this line of questioning. Shakespeare shows Timon to be more interested in Apemantus than any other single guest at his party. Timon is curious, he wonders about the philosopher's art, but is met by cold and detached disinterest. Timon receives nothing but cold images of blood and violence from Alcibiades and the usual over the top flattery from his other guests. He has here singled out the philosopher in his midst to give him some kind of indication of how Athenian life might be improved were he to be in power.

Timon gives a serious indication here that were he properly directed towards the good life, he could have made a stunning gentleman indeed, friend to philosophy and

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<sup>211</sup> Timon's turn to misanthropy is strikingly similar to Apemantus' mocking descriptions of himself. For Shakespeare, as for Plato, poor philosophers give inspiration to, and reinforce citizens' turns to misanthropy. Notice that Socrates says that those with improper philosophic natures do great harm to private men and cities. In Book VI he also mentions men who go into exile among the “wild beasts” who can keep calm in the presence of great storms “under a little wall”, all events and language that are featured prominently in the latter acts of *Timon of Athens*. Although I cannot develop the idea here, one might say that Lear represents the wilderness exile that can turn his philosophic nature towards true contemplation of the good, while Timon cannot. Republic 519a and 495a-496e

protector of the city. His attempt at a genuine understanding of the philosophic position regarding the true aims of political life is met by Apemantus with pure scorn. Apemantus says simply he has no “angry wit to be a lord” and precisely as the poet did earlier in the scene, directs the conversation to the sight of the merchant! Shakespeare invites us to notice that precisely as the poet failed in his most important task, being asked what strange power of Athenian life leads to its corruption, Apemantus performs precisely the same failure and escapes the conversation in precisely the same manner. This is not simply a stage direction from Shakespeare to have whoever plays the merchant more active in the script; it is a subtle direction to the reader that indicates the city has been failed by its tragic poets and that their philosophic replacements are similarly incapable of mending the soul of Athens.

Having dealt briefly with Shakespeare's introduction to the problems with philosophic and poetic expression in Athens, the question remains as to how Timon's character leads him into a misanthropic abyss. If we return to the *Phaedo* as our guide, Socrates tells us the turn is due to the “too great confidence of inexperience”. If we are right about Shakespeare's debt to Plato, we should not expect to find a virtuous and noble Timon, but rather one that proceeds on a naïve understanding of friendship. Soellner, however, argues for a Timon that is in the beginning “swan-white” before turning “raven-black” and is characterized early by a spirit of nobility, love and benevolence.<sup>212</sup> We must wonder, however, is Timon truly a saint who through a realization of the hollowness of the human heart turns to a loss of his desire for living, or whether, as Swigg aptly notes, “His misanthropy is a logical extension of his philanthropy”.<sup>213</sup> If Timon does

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<sup>212</sup> Soellner, R. (1979) *Timon of Athens*. Ohio State University Press. pp.65-76

<sup>213</sup> Swigg, R “Timon of Athens and the Growth of Discrimination” *RES* 62 (1967): 387-394

undergo some radical transformation towards misanthropy, then we must admit he is in the beginning a good and sympathetic character. If, on the other hand, his philanthropy is even in the beginning demonstrative of an excess of confidence and inexperience, as Plato teaches, then we are in a much better position to argue for Shakespeare crafting a tragedy around a Socratic warning.

Shakespeare uses the issue of Ventidius' debt to show that Timon regards those around him as more than business partners or acquaintances, but as genuine friendships. When Ventidius, the man Timon bailed out of jail, returns to Timon with what is owed to him, he is rejected. Ventidius is quite clear with Timon that he has recently become very rich with the passing of his father and with "grateful virtue" is bound by love to repay his creditor. Timon refuses the repayment on the grounds that he gives his love freely for none "can truly say he gives, if he receives...faults that are rich are fair"(Timon, I.II.8-14). Ventidius understands friendship as the citizen does, as a kind of equal giving and taking between two like partners. To a man like Ventidius who was once in need of receiving help, Timon's remark can be seen as nothing less than an insult. Timon's refusal indicates not philanthropy, but inequality. Ventidius alludes to the creation of a bond between the men that can be realized on the basis of their equal wealth, but Timon refuses the repayment and thus refuses to acknowledge Ventidius as an equal or as a potential friend. Timon feels he can establish friendship on the basis of inequality, what he calls a "rich fault", and Shakespeare seems to agree with Plato that the first step towards misanthropy is just such a misguided notion of what constitutes friendship. If we agree with Aristotle's argument that friendship is only possible among equals, then we

would not be hasty in pronouncing true friendship to be impossible for Timon.<sup>214</sup>

Without friendship, there can be no real benevolence.

Timon builds on his fanciful understanding of friendship in the toast he gives to his guests (Timon, I.II.40). Timon opens his speech by calling out to his “good friends”. To what does Timon owe the honour of such a bounty of good friends? Timon traces his bounty to the grace of the gods, believing that they have provided him with friends close to his heart. Timon, then, breaks from the classic understanding of friendship in two ways. He is unwilling to receive gifts from his equals and traces his good fortune to a free gift from the gods themselves (Aristotle, 1159a1). Timon is completely divorced from the reality that he owes everything before him to the simple act of borrowing his exorbitant wealth from others; he believes himself at the whim of the gods and not man. “I have told more of you to myself than you can with modesty speak in your own behalf”, he says, admitting to his guests that he has crafted imaginary visions of their character in his mind rather than let them account for themselves (Timon, I.II.90). Timon then connects friends directly with utility, saying they would be useless if we never had any need of them. This makes his refusal of Ventidius' repayment all the more bizarre; it is as though Timon has relapsed into a kind of extreme solipsism where the true character and desires of those around him are completely ignored in favour of a reality of his own construction. He admits that friends are only friends in so far as they have need of one another, but Timon never admits he needs anyone for anything other than as an empty

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<sup>214</sup>Aristotle's description of friendships of utility and pleasure are very reminiscent of the kinds of friendships we see in the play. Aristotle even notes “Among such friendships people also class the friendship of host and guest” which seems to be how Timon conceives of the relationship. The friendship of the good, however, relies on a certain equality of virtue and goodness that Timon refuses to believe in or act on.

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 1155-1156

vessel to pour his loaned wealth into. All of this builds towards Timon's definitive statement about life in which he says we are all born to do benefits and that nothing is more one's own than the riches of his friends. One imagines that those present have a very different understanding of what this means than Timon does. Timon is absolutely obsessed with the idea of giving to others because he seems to see no discrepancy between what he owns and what he gives away. He trusts the character of those he deems his friends not based on their actual qualities or virtues, but on his own imagination's fanciful construction of them.

To Apemantus' crass rejection of the sincerity of this speech, the 'Third Lord' responds with a "promise" that the speech moved him. Shakespeare includes this timid response to show that Timon's guests are not truly moved by his rhetoric, but rather flatter him because of the obvious material advantages it brings. Timon, too, does not really seem to care if his speech moves his guests, so long as it seems as if it does. If one was to reconstruct some kind of consistent view of life from Timon's perspective, it would resemble a lord who has believed the tales he hears about man's dishonorable nature so completely that he is unwilling to experience even a moment of their reality; his unwillingness to engage in real life necessitates the construction of a completely artificial world for him to play in. He makes no money of his own, refuses repayment from those he has benefited on the basis of the absolute superiority of giving, believes himself directed by the whims of the gods and makes images to himself of what he imagines his friends are really like, lest he have to truly learn about any of them. If one attempts to think through the logical conclusions of the bizarre things that Timon says, we realize that the beauty of his rhetoric parallels Agathon's speech in the *Symposium*. The beautiful

composition of his speech is matched only by its vacuousness. Whereas Socrates listens intently to the speech and crafts a wonderful and mysterious tale about Diotima in order to reform Agathon's understanding of love, all the 'philosopher' Apemantus can muster is to mockingly call the listeners bastards (Timon, I.II.109). The uncivil philosopher fails again to prevent the movement towards misanthropy.

Having peered briefly under the cloak of Timon's rhetoric, one wonders whether it is his speech alone that has been corrupted by sophistry. Socrates answers Callicles' praise of rhetoric by questioning him about his role in the proper business of the city:

Is there anyone who was wicked before, unjust, undisciplined, and foolish, a visitor or townsmen, a slave or free man, who because of Callicles has turned out admirable and good?..Whom will you say you've made a better person through your association with him? (Gorgias, 515a-b)

This issue gets very much at the heart of *Timon of Athens*; for all his supposedly noble deeds and charitable giving, whom in the city has Timon made better through his association with them? Where do we ever see his virtue? Timon frees Ventidius from debtor's prison but refuses his repayment and is in turn refused help when he is in need. He assists his servant Lucilius to marry by promising his father a sizable dowry upon their marriage. Aside from the questionable relationship between the old man and Lucilius (the scene reads more like an extortion plot than the fulfillment of forbidden love) are we not to remark upon the fact that Timon will soon 'discover' his complete inability to follow up on this promise? Assuming the love between Lucilius and the girl is real, Timon has promised him a small fortune that he is unable to provide. What on first sight appears to be noble charity becomes upon reflection a very questionable act indeed.

Although we first find out about Timon's complete failure at managing his household from his chief servant Flavius in two asides, Timon does not discover it until the end of Act II. He tells Flavius he is completely taken aback by this news because had he been made aware of this beforehand, he would have “rated my expense / As I had leave of means” (Timon, II.II.130). In private, Timon shows a glimmer of knowledge regarding prudent household management. It was not, therefore, that he is completely ignorant of how to manage his money, but that he turned away from such knowledge in favour of sophistic rhetoric. When Flavius responds by mentioning all the times he came and laid the books in front of him, he claims Timon would throw the books away and say he found the money to pay the debts in Flavius' “honesty”. Timon does not disagree, meaning in that moment he actually believed his debt would be paid through the imaginary presence of perceived virtue. Flavius' response to Timon's distracted longing for his dwindling wealth is brief and wise:

O my good lord, the world is but a word:  
 Were it all yours to give it in a breath,  
 How quickly were it gone! (Timon, II.II.159)

Timon responds with the full recognition that what Flavius says is true. It is perhaps the one brief moment in the play where Timon seems to gain true wisdom about his nature and the means by which it might be corrected. For a second, he has glimpsed the truth of the Socratic warning. Flavius, however, is not a philosopher. He succumbs to the same disease as all of Athens by pursuing two overlong speeches to his master filled with extravagant rhetoric and flattery. Timon is won over by such talk and his moment of insight passes. He silences his servant and concocts the fanciful dream that his poverty is a blessing, for it will allow him to call on his 'loving friends' for support. Timon's

reversion back to a nonsensical dream of his friends paying off all his debts brings with it a reversion back to his lofty but vacuous rhetoric of love, bonds, crowns, friends, vessels and hearts.

This scene is important because it offers the careful reader the suggestion that reformation for Timon was not entirely impossible. Flavius fails him because he is but a simple servant, wise in matters of everyday prudence but not in the turning of souls. Where has Shakespeare placed our less than valiant philosopher during this crucial moment in Timon's life? He is nearby, indeed, but has run off with Shakespeare's fool scolding servants and pages. The presence of the scene with Apemantus and the fool is indicative of the failure of philosophy in Athens; instead of counselling Timon in the one moment in the play where he displays a vulnerability to prudence and true knowledge of his nature, the philosopher and the fool become friends and skip town. We are reminded here of the passage in the *Republic* where Socrates describes the wisdom of the analogy of the cave not as “producing” any new insight in the subject, but rather as an art of “turning around”. Socrates calls the virtue of exercising prudence somehow “more divine” than all others because it never completely loses its power in a human being. Prudential knowledge is so powerful it cannot be entirely rooted out by ignoble habits and exercises. Shakespeare shows us precisely this image here, including the caveat that the philosopher of Athens, Apemantus, is ignorant of the proper art of turning men's souls around and is thus “useless and harmful” (*Republic*, 518b – 519a).

Apemantus is rather like Socrates without any notion whatsoever of philosophy's political component, ie: of the absolute necessity of the reform of flattery into a tool for the betterment of man and society. Shakespeare argues a non-political philosopher may

still be virtuous, but utterly inconsequential to the fate of the city. Neither Timon, the high minded aristocrat, nor Alcibiades, the despotic general, are ever significantly impacted by his presence. The philosopher has failed to reform Athens, and its corruption increases in magnitude.

Having shown how Shakespeare depicts Timon in sophistic and ignoble garb from the very beginning of the play, it becomes much easier to accept Swigg's thesis that Timon's misanthropy is but a costume change away from his 'philanthropy'. If we consider again the beginning of the play's emphasis on man's dishonourable and tutored nature, we see that Timon's turn to misanthropy changes little regarding his view of the world. Timon's first 'mad' rant in the wood claims that only through “contempt of nature” can great fortune be attained and says there is “nothing level in our cursed natures, but direct villainy” (Timon, IV.III.20). Nature is as it was before, to be opposed, mastered and changed. Timon openly proclaims the logical extension of his sophistic beliefs. Timon's blunt hatred for all humanity is the result of his rhetorically constructed barriers to life being exposed for what they are, fanciful and empty. With nothing to replace his imaginary world, he but exaggerates the basic sophistic position that society and friendship are nothing but poison because all men are thieves (Timon, IV.I.20-35 and IV.III.430-450). In other words, self-interest orders man, and justice is but the interest of the stronger - the sophist's central claim in the *Republic*.

Timon's love of flattery and complete disregard for self-reflection is therefore best understood as the result of inexperience and naivety, not as an excess of virtue and benevolence. The character is not 'fated' to become a misanthrope at all, as Timon's brief moment of insight shows. What he needed was a political philosopher, knowledgeable in

the turning of souls, to correct his path and show him that it is precisely his great confidence in inexperience that leads him down a dark and contemptible road. The play is tragic not because Timon falters, but because he never began. The philosophers and poets in the play fail at producing anything like self-reflection, and so Timon proceeds down the path to misanthropy. The precise echoing of the plot in the *Phaedo* and the physical and philosophic parallels with the *Symposium* belie a fundamental debt of Shakespeare's to Plato. His genius lies in turning philosophic wisdom into fully realized dramatic action.

## Chapter 7: Shakespeare's Alcibiades

For many critics, the meaning of Alcibiades' presence in *Timon of Athens* has been its most confounding element. Shakespeare's Alcibiades has been variously perceived as being under-characterized, nothing like his historical counterpart, and as evidence for the unfinished nature of the play. One scholar who has taken the play itself very seriously as a Shakespearean analysis of political life is Leo Paul de Alvarez. The Alvarez hypothesis argues the dominance of the famous Athenian general suggests that Shakespeare means to say that only an Athens ruled by Alcibiades could have possibly won the Peloponnesian War. Eloquent as this idea is, it does not ultimately deal with the consequences of the possibility it puts forth. Why has Shakespeare chosen to end a play about societal corruption and misanthropy with the ascent of a tyrant? When cast in the light of the Alcibiades that follows Plutarch and Thucydides, there is a significant dampening of the sense of benevolent resolution that has hitherto been read into the play's ending. In this section I argue that Plutarch and Thucydides do not infer that an Alcibiades in complete control of Athens would have won the Peloponnesian War, but rather that Shakespeare crafts a cautionary political tale about tyranny centered on an Alcibiades who closely follows the ancient accounts. Shakespeare uses the rise of Alcibiades to show the dangerous consequences of a demagogue who takes advantage of the lack of a strong political and philosophic authority in a democracy like ancient Athens.

What Alvarez's contention tries to do is make Shakespeare's play into a vehicle for praising Alcibiades as the "middle of humanity" and salvation of all Athens.<sup>215</sup> We are told this is what "the play indicates" but we are not told exactly how or why this is so. Instead, I argue such a reading of Alcibiades' re-emergence into Athens distorts the true similarities between Shakespeare and his ancient sources. That there is no other play where Shakespeare rewrites history in order to say how a war might be won does not in itself refute the hypothesis, but it should serve as impetus enough to re-examine the play's ending in light of an interpretation that both resolves the plot of the play and offers a possible resolution to the problems the work itself addresses. Nowhere in the play is the Peloponnesian War mentioned, nor are there any hints at impending external threats to Athens. *Timon of Athens* is rather a 'domestic' play; it demonstrates a great city whose complete corruption is unable to be tended to by its local poetic and philosophic ambassadors. For the play to end making a point about a war we have heard nothing about, in the context of issues of flattery, sophistry and uncivil philosophy, is at best, extremely unlikely.

The evidence that Thucydides even meant to convey what Alvarez claims is very doubtful. Thucydides says "in the public sphere his command of strategy was unrivalled" and that by replacing Alcibiades the people caused the city's downfall "not long afterwards."<sup>216</sup> What this suggests is that Thucydides thought the replacement of Alcibiades in regards to the conquest of Sicily an imprudent decision when considered purely in terms of military strategy. Had he been left in charge, it is very possible the

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<sup>215</sup> Leo Paul S. de Alvarez (1981) "Timon of Athens", ed. John Alvis and Thomas West *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, pp. 178. Carolina Academic Press.

<sup>216</sup> Thucydides (2009) *The Peloponnesian War*, tr. Martin Hammond, pp. 316. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Athenians might have won the battle. Nowhere does Thucydides imply that had Alcibiades not been recalled for the charge of defiling the Hermei that Athens would therefore have won the entire Peloponnesian War. By Book VIII, Thucydides will go so far as to say the first outstanding service Alcibiades had ever done for Athens was to convince the democrats at Samos against open revolution, hardly the kind of praise one would expect if its author thought Alcibiades the mistreated saviour of all Athens.<sup>217</sup>

Plutarch largely agrees with Thucydides, claiming that upon Alcibiades' jubilant return from exile the Athenians were greeted with much sorrow at the thought that they would not have lost the exchange in Sicily nor their "hope" if Alcibiades had not been recalled.<sup>218</sup> Saying the Sicilian expedition could have been won and their hope not lost is considerably milder than the claim that an unimpeded Alcibiades would have extended Athen's imperial dominion across the known world. Considering Thucydides and Plutarch spend so much time devoted to Alcibiades' various personal extravagancies and their relation to his public failings, why would it make sense to say that he alone would have won the war?<sup>219</sup> If Alcibiades did not cultivate a character of such extravagance and

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<sup>217</sup> Thucydides (n. 2) pp. 458, Why would Thucydides praise Alcibiades for stopping a revolt against Athens if what he really wanted was for Alcibiades to attack the city? It is unthinkable that Thucydides would praise the attack on Athens we see at the conclusion of *Timon of Athens*; See also Gribble who notices the unflattering aspects of Thucydides' portrayal as, "strongly realistic, evaluating and exposing Alcibiades' character, motivations, and weaknesses as a political actor" David Gribble (1999) *Alcibiades and Athens: A Study in Literary Presentation*, pp. 191. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>218</sup> I use the North version of Plutarch as it is the one Shakespeare would have been familiar with. Shakespeare's use of Plutarch is well researched. His alterations of Plutarch are never as radical as what Alvarez proposes. Plutarch (1967) *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, tr. Sir Thomas North, pp. 133. New York: AMS Press.

<sup>219</sup> Edmund Bloedow (1973) *Alcibiades Reexamined*. Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH. Bloedow makes the even more serious argument that Alcibiades' entire career provides little evidence of military genius. Why, for example, if Alcibiades is so skilled in rhetoric is he unable to clear himself of the charges? (pp. 16) Bloedow successfully argues for Thucydides seeing Alcibiades being Athens' best hope, if only his character had made it possible for him to assume command (pp. 83). Bloedow sees Thucydides shift in depicting Alcibiades that begins in Book

ambition, he never would have been recalled at all. The argument is cyclical and establishes little in terms of the meaning of Shakespeare's play.

The meaning of the play becomes clearer if one assumes that Shakespeare is not making a point specifically about the Sicilian expedition or indeed the Peloponnesian War, but rather a more general claim about the relationship between the cause of a city's corruption and the implications of its 'cure'. The Alcibiades we see in *Timon of Athens* embodies precisely the suspicions of tyrannical ambition that we hear about in Thucydides, Plutarch, and Plato's accounts. In Shakespeare's Athens, the corruption of the city is so complete that even the poets and the philosophers possess no remedy. The only solution to the problem of Athenian corruption is precisely what they feared most, the need to rest complete power in the person of Alcibiades; the turn to tyranny. As I will show, Shakespeare gives us many reasons to suggest that recourse to resting absolute power in a man like Alcibiades in order to bring about the salvation of the city entitles consequences of a most dangerous nature.

For a great many critics, Alcibiades has been a tremendously difficult character to read. One prevailing view claims that interpreters' wildly contradictory remarks about Alcibiades indicate that Shakespeare's intention for the character are unclear and so must not have been fully developed.<sup>220</sup> This suggestion has been taken even further to say that Alcibiades' "uneven exposition" proves that the play is defective, incomplete and "its survival and publication were an accident".<sup>221</sup> These arguments are predicated on the

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VIII to mean that Alcibiades can at best be given only partial credit for limited military success and that such ventures came with rather considerable military and diplomatic failure (pp. 85).

<sup>220</sup> William Shakespeare (1957) *Timon of Athens*, Ed: H.J. Oliver, pp. xxxviii-xl. London: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>221</sup> Geoffrey Bullough (1957) *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, pp. 225-250. New York: Columbia University Press.

claim the Alcibiades of Shakespeare's play does not resemble the adaptable and cunning character one finds in Thucydides and Plutarch. Soellner's reading began the process of correcting these views by pointing out that Alcibiades' contradictory remarks about Timon's poverty are actually a remarkable example of his "Machiavellian" ability to feign ignorance, and not simply an incomplete draft or oversight on Shakespeare's behalf.<sup>222</sup> While Soellner reads this particular episode with skill, it is a certain misreading to call the character successfully Machiavellian given that Alcibiades seems to demonstrate great princely errors alongside his successful cunning and violence.<sup>223</sup>

Looking back on the early critics now, it really does seem absurd to say that Shakespeare brilliantly utilized Plutarch in his exposition of Julius Caesar, Brutus, Coriolanus and others, but was somehow unable or unwilling to grasp the essence of Alcibiades. If I may be allowed to summarize Plutarch, he seems to say Alcibiades possessed three main traits: a chameleon like ability to adapt to changing environments, considerable military and diplomatic skill, and a strong penchant for eccentric behaviour and personal extravagance.<sup>224</sup> As I will show, the Alcibiades we see in Shakespeare's Athens meets precisely this description; that Alcibiades says little and keeps mainly to the background of the play is not a sign of his underdevelopment as a character, but rather

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<sup>222</sup> Rolf Soellner (1979) *Timon of Athens*, pp. 56. Ohio: Ohio State University Press.

<sup>223</sup> Machiavelli says "people should either be caressed or crushed. If you do them minor damage they will get their revenge; but if you cripple them there is nothing they can do." It is implied that Alcibiades will kill only 'some' Athenians upon his usurpation and thus seems to do only 'minor damage' to Athens. Alcibiades does not cripple the city presumably because he needs it to extend his imperial ambitions, but his eccentricities make him the perfect target for the kind of revenge Machiavelli describes. Machiavelli (1995) *The Prince*, tr. David Wootton, pp. 9-11. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

<sup>224</sup> Plutarch (n. 4)

that Shakespeare keenly understood the implications of the assertion that the Athenians began to suspect Alcibiades of wishing to become a tyrant. As Thucydides says:

Alarmed at the greatness of the license in his own life and habits, and at the ambition which he showed in all things whatsoever that he undertook, the mass of the people marked him as an aspirant to the tyranny and became his enemies.<sup>225</sup>

The combination of Thucydides' rendering of his imperial/despotic ambition and Plutarch's suggestion of an abundance of sexual desire are both represented in Shakespeare's portrayal, but he relegates such allusions to the background in order that the corruption of Athens take centre stage. This suggests that Shakespeare downplays Alcibiades character not because he misunderstood or left him unfinished, but because by the time we meet Alcibiades in the play he is aware of this growing suspicion against him and has already begun formulating a plot to gain absolute power. He is quiet, but what he does say belies a distinctly violent, if not cannibalistic attitude toward his fellow men. It makes perfect sense for Alcibiades to relegate himself to the background; he is a primary witness to the corruption of Athens and longs for the perfect moment for violent reform.

Because of the bombast surrounding Alcibiades entrance and the frequent mention of him as "captain", it is safe to assume that we are not dealing with the young Alcibiades, but rather one reasonably seasoned in combat. Knowing that Shakespeare was aware of both Plato's *Symposium* and Plutarch's *Lives*, it is possible to construct a plausible history behind his character as we see him here.<sup>226</sup> The two actions we know that Alcibiades was a part of before the Sicilian expedition were the battles of Potidaea and Delium. Although Potidaea was a defeat for Athens, Socrates saved Alcibiades' life

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<sup>225</sup> Thucydides (n. 2) pp.316

<sup>226</sup> See for ex: Ronald Gray (2006) 'Will in the Universe: Shakespeare's Sonnets, Plato's *Symposium*, Alchemy and Renaissance Neoplatonism' *Shakespeare Survey* 59.

and he was subsequently promoted for the battle of Delium where he was particularly awestruck by the manner in which Socrates held himself in retreat. Alcibiades remarks that because Socrates kept himself keenly aware of his surroundings and did not simply flee in unreflective haste, the enemy were afraid of Socrates' confidence and instead pursued others.<sup>227</sup> For his actions on the battlefield and his relentless attempts to reform him, Plutarch claims that Alcibiades feared and revered Socrates alone, and despised the rest of his lovers.<sup>228</sup> Alcibiades learns about the power of quiet confidence from a man also known for his considerable rhetorical abilities.

This is the likely backdrop Shakespeare draws upon for the first words of his Alcibiades, as he says upon being received, "Sir, you have saved my longing, and I feed most hungerly on your sight" (Timon, 1.1.250).<sup>229</sup> There is a certain grace in Alcibiades' brevity, and when read carefully, we see that his reverence for Socrates runs deeper than a mutual fearlessness in the face of death. Alcibiades has learned to speak ironically. What is Alcibiades longing for? To Timon and his guests, Alcibiades longs for extravagant companions like themselves. But as we learn from the ancient sources, Alcibiades longed most for an imperial empire with himself as its leader.<sup>230</sup> Alcibiades certainly seems to have his pulse on the heart of Athens, is it too much to presume that he was already aware in some way of Timon's exorbitant debt? As his creditors are soon to come calling, it is in fact likely that Timon's various lenders began talking openly about the unpaid debts to whoever would listen. One should also

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<sup>227</sup> Plato (1989) *Symposium*, tr. Alexander Nehamas, 220d-221c. USA: Hackett Publishing ; Plutarch (n. 4) pp.96-97

<sup>228</sup> Plutarch (n. 4) pp.95

<sup>229</sup> All references to the play are from: William Shakespeare (1936) 'The Life of Timon of Athens' in *The Complete Works*. Philadelphia: Doubleday Doran and Co.

<sup>230</sup> Alvarez (n. 1) notices this connection also, suggesting Alcibiades could have become an early Alexander. I am not sure if he means this as praise, but I do not.

notice that Shakespeare explicitly presents Alcibiades as present when Timon is mobbed by the usurers, but says absolutely nothing in his defence. Timon even calls upon Alcibiades immediately before being mobbed, but is met by complete indifference (Timon, 2.2.15). Why would the ‘salvation’ of Athens, so highly skilled in rhetorical ability, not stand up for his friend amongst the usurers? As in Thucydides, Alcibiades is an expert at making himself seem an intimate friend of powerful people when he thinks it will serve his own interest in increasing his esteem and power amongst the Athenian people.<sup>231</sup> Alcibiades feeds hungrily on Timon’s sight because he is to use the downfall of Athens’ most well-known philanthropist as a catapult for his domination of Athens.

When Timon first gushes over Alcibiades’ presence he says they will “share a bounteous time in different pleasures.” This too is meant to remind one of the accounts of Alcibiades’ excess, but it also serves as a reminder that Timon shares many of these same qualities. Timon’s poetic misanthropy is not altogether different from Alcibiades’ despotism in that both are concerned chiefly with their own self-interest. Both even come to see Athens as essentially corrupt to the core, the main difference being Timon includes himself amongst those corrupted whilst Alcibiades does not. He possesses that Socratic fearlessness in the face of death while Timon knows only the poets’ paralysing tales about the wheels of fate.

Timon seems to catch onto Alcibiades’ disinterest in the proceedings and wonders whether he wouldn’t rather “be at a breakfast of enemies than a dinner of

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<sup>231</sup> Thucydides (n. 2) pp.438-456: Alcibiades exaggerates his friendship with Tissaphernes so the Athenians will hold him in higher regard and recall him. This strategy proves quite effective and he is eventually given a generalship and “full control” of the Athenian affairs, quite the parallel with what occurs in Shakespeare.

friends”. Alcibiades’ response has a double meaning, “So they were bleeding-new, my lord, there’s no meat like em: I could wish my best friend at such a feast”

(Timon, 1.2.70). On the one hand, the remark flatters Timon by making him believe he is this best friend, eagerly requested on the field of battle. If you look at the statement again, however, Alcibiades is completely ambiguous as to whether he means the best friend is to do the eating or be eaten. Shakespeare seems to indicate to us that for all Alcibiades’ skill in bloodletting, he possesses an equal cunning in speech. Alcibiades speaks in darkly cannibalistic riddles, almost as if he dares the other guests to decipher them. His words burst at the seams with *thumos*. One is reminded here of Plutarch’s story that sees Alcibiades arrive to a dinner party and proceed to confiscate half of the gold and silver, the host cowering before him in praise for taking only half, when he could have taken all.<sup>232</sup> While Alcibiades takes only half the gold, he will take all of Athens. Where we do not have good poetry or philosophy, cities tend to tyranny.

In this way, it is a testament to Shakespeare’s virtue as a writer that the brief glimpses we get of Alcibiades’ character go such a long way in alluding to the ancient accounts. Alcibiades is not unfinished, but subtle. He continues to show his ability to speak ironically when responding later in the banquet to Timon. Timon feels sorry for Alcibiades because he spends his life living amongst the dead and because it is these dead friends that populate the lands he owns. Alcibiades replies only by saying “Ay, defil’d land, my lord” (1.2.223). Defiled works in the ordinary sense in which Timon would take it, meaning the land has been spoiled by the blood of his friends and enemies. The other meaning of defiled, however, is to desecrate something that is specifically sacred. Anyone familiar with the most important accusation against

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<sup>232</sup> Plutarch (no. 4) pp.94

Alcibiades knows that he was charged with defiling the statues of the Hermei. His response, then, flows naturally as a reply to Timon while also reminding the attentive that we are dealing with a man who has not only a loose attachment to the laws of the city, but also to the sacredness of the city's gods.

His loose attachment to the laws, to the gods, and his cannibalistic language towards his 'friends' are all-important components to Alcibiades' character, especially in relation to the crucial scene before the senate. Alcibiades has the unfortunate tendency to be read here as exemplifying gracious empathy, the need for love and acceptance and as the bringer of humanity to corrupted Athens.<sup>233</sup> While it is understandable that Alcibiades could be read this way, it is not so much that it pertains to his actual character as much as it shows Shakespeare's ability to present a man so persuasive he can even have great success at pulling the wool over the eyes of his critics.<sup>234</sup> But strip away the considerably persuasive rhetoric, and what is left in the scene? Alcibiades attempts to secure a pardon for a violent murder, and when he doesn't get his way he becomes enraged and swears to destroy his own city. Is this the work of a lover of humanity? One wonders whether Alcibiades' explosive spirit of anger even allow him to form genuine friendships, never mind embody the loving aspects of humanity writ large. Does Alcibiades even expect his plea for clemency to

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<sup>233</sup> A.S. Collins (1946) 'Timon of Athens: a reconsideration' *Review of English Studies*, 22, pp. 99-108 ; J.C. Maxwell (1948) 'Timon of Athens' *Scrutiny*, 15, pp.206 ; Michael Tinker (1974) *Shakespeare's Late Plays: Essays in Honor of Charles Crow*, ed. Richard C. Tobias and Paul G. Zolbrod, pp. 76-88. Athens: Ohio University Press.

<sup>234</sup> Phillips accepts Alcibiades' claims as the sincere truth, even though they contradict what he says elsewhere in the play as well as all the ancient sources. James Emerson Phillips Jr (1972) *The State in Shakespeare's Greek and Roman Plays*, pp.133. New York: Octagon Books ; These and other similar readings culminate in the "salvation" of Athens hypothesis, instead of seeing Alcibiades ascent as the final completion of democratic corruption. See Alvarez (n. 1).

work? Are we not rather dealing with a man looking for any excuse to enrage the senate and destroy it?

The only reasonable justification critics have for reading Alcibiades favourably here is because his banishment that ends the scene appears on first glance to be quite rash. But is it not possible that Alcibiades gets exactly what he wants? The scene begins by reminding us that the democracy lacks a visible central authority, and the casualness with which the senators discuss mercy and sin suggests there is no single arbiter on justice or morality. The senator says that the unnamed soldier must die because mercy will only embolden him. His actions can only be stopped by the strong arm of the law. The thinking here seems to be that by punishing the man severely, similar such actions in the city will be prevented. For the senate, it is only the powerful deterrent of the law that keeps Athenian corruption at bay. The law binds citizens together as their common inheritance from the gods of the city. Law is all they know in order to keep the powerful passions of the people in check.

Alcibiades enters the proceedings after the trial has completed. Why? If this matter was truly about defending the honour of a virtuous friend, why skip the trial and show up late to the sentencing followed by a train of attendants? Surely an on-time and alone Alcibiades would be in a much better position to defend his soldier 'friend'. His late entrances to both Timon and Agathon's banquets suggest he is greatly concerned about making a statement with his appearances; Alcibiades is perhaps the first man to consistently arrive 'fashionably late'. "Honour, health, and compassion to the senate", he announces as he arrives, and the senators react with considerable amazement. It appears Alcibiades is not only late, but was uninvited.

Only Alcibiades could walk uninvited into a murder trial followed by a train of admirers.

Alcibiades tries to flatter the court by claiming he is a “humble suitor” to their virtues. But what Alcibiades claims as their virtue is precisely the opposite of what they had just established as their *modus operandi*. Alcibiades claims pity is the virtue of the court, while they see such actions as increasing Athenian corruption. Right away we are to notice that Alcibiades has misread the character of the court. Only tyrants, he says, use the law cruelly. He has not only misread the character of the senate, he has deliberately insulted their judgement. Having already decided that this soldier is to die, they can only interpret Alcibiades to be saying a death sentence is a judgement fit only for tyrants. It should be apparent, then, that the Alcibiades we see before us is very much not only the gifted orator we hear about in Plutarch, but also the student of Socrates. It is Socrates, after all, that went to such lengths to stress to young men the importance of the temperate and merciful virtues in place of the Homeric. We see precisely this conflict here, with the caveat that nothing Alcibiades has said prior to his arrival in the senate gives us any indication that he is truly concerned about mercy. The quickness with which he abandons the ‘argument according to mercy’ suggests he intends to use it only to manipulate the emotions of the senate.<sup>235</sup>

Alcibiades attempts to extol the virtues of mercy, but he cannot keep from showing himself to be above the law. He frames the context for the murder saying his

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<sup>235</sup> I see Alcibiades as partially-Socratic following Mary Nichols thoughtful work which shows the way in which Alcibiades misunderstands certain aspects of the Socratic teaching. Mary Nichols (2007) “Philosophy and Empire: On Socrates and Alcibiades in Plato’s Symposium”, 502-521. *Polity* 39.

friend has, “in hot blood...stepp'd into the law, which is past depth...to those that, without heed, do plunge into 't.” (Timon, 3.5.15) What Alcibiades seems to be saying here is that the law goes too far in punishing those that commit their actions unaware of the consequences. Surely he doesn't think this should be the case for all citizens, and so we see the beginning of an argument towards the ascendancy of the military regime as such. Alcibiades begins his defence by showing deference to the senate, but then proceeds to suggest twice that its application of the law leans too far towards tyranny. When a notorious captain of unparalleled ambition walks into a courtroom and suggests the laws do not apply to soldiers and that the senate itself is tyrannical, can we blame the court for reacting harshly?

Alcibiades even attempts to make the crime itself virtuous, saying that he showed neither cowardice nor passion in the murder, and simply attacked the man with a noble fury because he tried to ruin his reputation. Is the lack of passion involved in the murder supposed to persuade the senate of its virtue? That this soldier friend looked upon the act as “if he had but proved an argument” should not persuade the senate of the need for clemency, but rather the very opposite. The unfeeling recourse to violent murder over a simple matter of reputation would, and should, alarm the court (and the audience) as to the seriousness of the crime.

The senator's response has two elements, the first rebuffs Alcibiades' argument as to the honour of the murder itself, the second suggests what practice could be undertaken to make the soldier honourable. The paradox the senator speaks of is Alcibiades' attempt to make manslaughter into a laudable quality of man while also trumpeting the merits of mercy. No lofty rhetoric can achieve this under the

circumstances. Arguments according to valour have their place on the battlefield, but not in the city. True valour, he says, consists now in suffering the consequences of one's deeds wisely. The senator advises a kind of stoicism, "You cannot make gross sins look clear: To revenge is no valour, but to bear." The senator turns Alcibiades' argument back on him. The other side of Socratic virtue is the absolute submission to the letter of the law as such. But Alcibiades is not entirely Socratic, he cannot accept the stoic side of the argument and thus moves on to a new strategy.

Alcibiades now wishes to discuss the matter entirely in military terms. If he took the senator's advice, men in war may as well "let the foes quietly cut their throats" and accept the "ass more captain than the lion". Alcibiades resorts to outright mockery of the court's position. He blurs the distinction between civil and military matters. While it is true that revenge is a certain kind of virtue in war, who could say the same for the maintenance of the polis? An Alcibiades in control of the laws of Athens would seem to desire the strictest of military dictatorship. The needs of war outweigh the need for law. Sensing he is losing the jury, Alcibiades changes strategy and accepts that murder is the most serious sin. Mercy now becomes just because Alcibiades claims there is an impossible tension between the laws of the gods and the reality of man's nature. To be angry is impious, but all men are angry. Since what the gods demand of man is unreasonable, the laws too must be so.<sup>236</sup> Man's disposition to commit acts of bloody violence means that the gods did not understand the natural condition of man and as such the laws they instituted should be overturned. It is hard to imagine a more radical claim made before a court of law. Alcibiades' boldness is

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<sup>236</sup> This seems to allude to Socrates' claim that he will obey the gods instead of men, with the caveat that for Socrates the gods teach adherence to the laws while for Alcibiades they are unintelligible commands.

matched only by the apology of Socrates, and the discussion here regarding the tensions of the gods certainly brings as much to the forefront.

The senators refuse to follow Alcibiades down this philosophic path. They are tired of his interruption and unmoved by his eloquence. It is at this point that the senators, sensing Alcibiades' growing anger, move to end the proceedings immediately. "You breathe in vain", they tell Alcibiades. The senators are moved to defend themselves on their own terms. They are, after all, in the court and not on the battlefield. By making it known the matter is definitively closed, they can discover once and for all whether the suspicions against Alcibiades' tyrannical ambitions are indeed true. Alcibiades claims that anger is man's natural state, how will he react to the definitive judgement of the lawful senate?

Alcibiades is stirred by the senate's boldness and his anger moves him from the universal to the particular. Instead of making claims about mercy or humanity as such, Alcibiades now appeals to this soldier's particular worth being predicated on his military service to Athens. This utilitarian argument claims that since the soldier has slain many of the senators' enemies on the battlefield, this should be sufficient enough "bribe" for his life. Alcibiades has moved from argument to bribery. This leads to the senate's most important passage wherein they describe the demerits of the soldier as far exceeding his worth to Athens on the field of battle.

The senators claim that this man has been known to cause riots, switch allegiances, and to frequently drink so much that he commits various "outrages". Although the scene is supposedly discussing the various demerits of this unknown soldier, the accusations presented here perfectly encapsulate those made against

Alcibiades himself.<sup>237</sup> In this way we are presented with Shakespeare's account of what Alcibiades' trial may have looked like had he successfully secured one before the expedition to Sicily. Alcibiades has plenty of arguments about justice, mercy, law and the gods, but he has no response whatsoever to the senators' claims about the soldier's character and his propensity to commit outrages against the city. As in Plutarch and Thucydides, it is Alcibiades' unwillingness to reign in his personal extravagance that is his undoing. Is this not how such a trial of Alcibiades would have gone? The best defence Alcibiades could muster against the charges of personal extravagance and impiety is to ignore them and appeal solely on his own personal worth to the military efforts of Athens. Alcibiades' last attempt is to remind the senators of his own valiant deeds, he is the best leader they have. Binding his own merit to this soldier's, he asks to allow the soldier to follow him to war, where he will likely die anyway. Of all the various theorists and military critics of the Sicilian expedition, none seem to have stumbled upon the very real possibility Shakespeare points to here. Had Alcibiades been left to fight in Sicily, he very well may have died. Such an outcome is far more likely than one that claims had he been left in charge he would have won the entire Peloponnesian War!

The appeal fails and the senator's remark is perfectly logical given the circumstances of the soldier's crime:

We are for law: he dies; urge it no more,  
 On height of our displeasure: friend or brother,  
 He forfeits his own blood that spills another. (Timon, 3.5.90)

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<sup>237</sup> For more on this connection see: Sara Hanna (Spring 2003) 'Alcibiades' Trial in Timon of Athens' *Classical and Modern Literature* 23, 1, pp.77-94.

They are consistently for law, and the law rightfully says that one who kills another in cold blood forfeits his own life. Rhetoric cannot make this murder just. They do not disagree whatsoever as to Alcibiades' worth to their military campaigns, but they cannot pardon based on personal excellence. The law binds all the members of the democracy as equals. This, ultimately, is what Alcibiades cannot accept and he continues to press the issue, each time in an increasingly threatening tone. What were the senators to do? They have already allowed the impropriety of attempting to defend an assailant after the trial is over and have put up with Alcibiades' musings on the tyrannical nature of their laws, the court and the gods. They acted in any reading with considerable temperance.

It is only after Alcibiades continues to threaten the court that they banish him. Only now does Alcibiades make mention of "usury". As Klein points out, however, there is good reason to suggest that usury meant more to Elizabethan audiences than the lending of money with interest. It could also be used to belie "all notion of social defect."<sup>238</sup> This reading fits with what Shakespeare presents us with here, since Alcibiades also mentions that "dotage" makes the senate ugly, which is an impairment of the intellect, and not a moral phenomenon at all. Alcibiades certainly seems to mean the word in both senses, with the important caveat that now he has suggested to the senate that their treatment of Timon will lead to their undoing. Timon is not brought up until Alcibiades has likely achieved what he set out for, banishment. He does not allow the senate to discuss the consequences of their treatment of Timon until after he has been definitively banished.

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<sup>238</sup> Karl Klein (2001) 'Timon of Athens', pp. 14-15. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Alcibiades condemns usury in his final soliloquy, but he does so only in relation to the superiority of the military life. Again, Alcibiades suggests that he is not incensed at the use of usury as such, but rather that he does not profit off such gains while he defends the nation at war. Alcibiades says that their decision is ultimately an insufficient repair for his wounds of war. The suggestion that Alcibiades acts with sincerity towards the end of friendship while Timon gives only for his own amusement might bear some merit, but it is impossible to simply overlook the enormity of what Alcibiades demands.<sup>239</sup> Alcibiades might do what he does for some vague notion of friendship, but it is the friendship of a riotous, drunken, murdering soldier. No sane society can capitulate to what Alcibiades is asking without severely compromising the integrity of the laws. Alcibiades certainly knew as much and is not bothered whatsoever by his banishment. He is stirred to the action Plutarch and Thucydides claimed he wanted most of all.

Alcibiades' last lines make it perfectly clear what he thinks about his own self-worth in relation to the sanctity of Athenian piety and law. He ends with "Tis honour with most lands to be at odds; Soldiers should brook as little wrongs as gods." One cannot help but think that this line has somehow been tragically overlooked.

Alcibiades ends his appearance at the trial by saying that soldiers need to tolerate the perceived wrongs of others as much as do the gods. Which is to say, not at all. He thinks himself a god, and so the allusions to the tyranny of the laws and the incompatibility of performing what the gods asks of us makes perfect sense.

Alcibiades is god, and his "more than angry" inclination must run its course for him to

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<sup>239</sup> Tinker (n. 17) pp. 76-88.

remain pious to himself. He knows thyself, and he is angry. Socratic intervention could never be expected to moderate a man of such overwhelming *thumos*. It is unthinkable for any critic, at this point, to think that Shakespeare truly points to Alcibiades as the unproblematic solution for the corruption of Athens. He is not simply aristocratic in a democratic age, he is convinced of his own divinity in a city of traditional piety. He possesses tyrannical ambition of the highest and most dangerous sort.

Indeed, the meeting in the woods between Timon and Alcibiades is demonstrative of the captain's overall arc in the course of the play, including my suggestion that Alcibiades is not empathetic, but calculating. Consider first the context of the scene, Alcibiades and his militia are headed to attack Athens (Timon, 4.3.41). Why would Alcibiades break rank with his troops, two prostitutes in tow, to search around a forested cave unless he had good reason to do so? That the senators so desperately attempted to persuade Timon to come back to Athens and command the defence force suggests not only that Timon was once an apt military commander, but that his plight is considerably sympathetic to the people of Athens and his restoration would be seen as a glorious return to form. The senators gain by installing a leader hypothetically capable of resisting Alcibiades' tyrannical ambition while maintaining popular appeal. The fact that the senators appeal to Timon for military and popular support draws the entire play together. It now makes perfect sense for Alcibiades to have visited Timon and said very little; he was in the presence of a former soldier, and a very popular one at that. He needed to be sized-up, befriended and observed.

Seen in this light, the meaning of the famous masque scene between Cupid and the dancing Amazons during Timon's banquet becomes considerably clearer. We must note first that Timon is quite startled by the announcement that women have decided to come to his banquet, and he shows little haste in asking them to leave once their act has been performed. As Fulton suggests, there is good reason to think that the Amazons are not simply dancing warriors, but also Elizabethan slang for prostitutes.<sup>240</sup> The women are led by Cupid who seems quite eager to sway Timon not with material gifts, but an assortment of sensual pleasures. Cupid insists they have come only as a feast for his eyes, but it is unclear whether Cupid means the men are not to sexually touch the women, or that such an arrangement requires an additional monetary investment.

Alcibiades' quiet observance of all that goes on at the banquet is partially explained by a strategic desire to quantify Timon, but Alcibiades can also remain silent because he lets others do his investigating for him. The fact that Cupid enters only moments after Alcibiades and introduces the prostitutes in order to "signify their pleasures" is impetus enough to examine the scene in relation to Plutarch. (Timon, 1.2.117) According to Plutarch, Cupid was the signifier Alcibiades famously held on his shield, it was the first symbol by which an enemy would know he was coming.<sup>241</sup> Alcibiades' Cupid did not hold an arrow of love, but a thunderbolt of war. He was Athens' erotic warrior *par excellence* and Shakespeare uses the connection with Cupid in order to suggest another means by which Alcibiades can feel out his potential

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<sup>240</sup> See for example See 3 Henry VI, where York accuses Margaret of behaving like "an Amazonian trull" (I.iv.114) and Robert C. Fulton III (1976) 'Timon, Cupid, and the Amazons' *Shakespeare Studies* 9, pp.283-299.

<sup>241</sup> Plutarch (n. 4) tellingly gives us this information as further evidence of his exorbitant and erotic character, pp.106.

opposition. True, the dance further demonstrates the extravagance of the banquet's proceedings, but more importantly that Timon shows only a very casual interest in erotic pleasure. Shakespeare wants us to see that Timon is moved only by material, as opposed to sensual, pleasures. Alcibiades' tyrannical ambition is fuelled by his angry and erotic nature, which Timon has none of. The first thing Timon thinks of as Cupid and the Amazons depart is his casket full of jewels. Whatever Timon once was on the field of battle, he is no longer any match for Alcibiades.

This is the backdrop upon which Alcibiades 'discovers' Timon in the woods. Soellner is right to point out Alcibiades' shrewdness in feigning ignorance about Timon's poverty, but we must go further and assert that he does so in order to confirm the reports he has heard that Timon could not be persuaded to re-join Athens as a private citizen or military commander. If Alcibiades visited Timon in order to demonstrate his empathy, his humanity, then why lie about how much he knows? Alcibiades feigns ignorance because he has his own ideas about how Timon should end up and he intends to see them out. Alcibiades approaches Timon with authority and asks the 'creature' what he is and commands it to speak. (Timon, 4.3.50) Alcibiades thinks himself a god, and now commands the lowly creatures around him to obey. Timon inverts Alcibiades' claim to godliness by reducing him to a common beast. Both men think the other a lowly animal and the disjuncture between how the two men see themselves reminds us of Aristotle's claim that those who live outside the city are either savage beasts or self-sufficient gods.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Aristotle (1984) *The Politics*, tr. Carnes Lord, pp.37: 1253a. Chicago: University Chicago Press.

Shakespeare plays with this relationship by showing how tenuous the distinction between beast and god actually is. Timon is in one sense unable to live in the city because of his savageness, but in the woods he spurns all other men and makes much of his self-sufficient relationship with nature. (Timon, 4.3.1-25) Alcibiades' self-sufficiency puts himself above the laws of the city, but that his banishment moves him to such revolutionary anger shows how irreparably tied he is to the fruits of reputation and power that only the city can bring. What we are meant to see, therefore, is an intense kinship between *misanthropos* and *tyrannus*; both spurn their role as citizens in the healthy polis because of an excess of anger. Timon's thoroughly tragic worldview means his anger causes him to relinquish ties to man as such, whereas Alcibiades' anger leads him to break the natural ties of the city, installing himself as the central and divine authority. There is a sense of sublime godliness in Timon's ability to distance himself from the city he feels wronged him and a kind of beastly childishness in Alcibiades' attack.

That Timon curses Alcibiades because he was born to conquer 'his' country speaks to this same sense of inversion that Shakespeare is drawing out. The misanthrope, who hates all mankind, seems to love Athens more than the tyrant who wishes to conquer it. In this way, there is a kind of nobility to Timon's wish that Alcibiades should kill every man, woman and child, since in doing so he will have destroyed the corruption once and for all instead of simply completing it. Timon loves the city even though it has destroyed him, and he wants to join it in extinction rather than be conquered by the ambitions of a tyrant. Alcibiades seems to be the only one who truly understands Timon's raving, and is the only one not turned to anger by his

spiteful raving. Alcibiades will take Timon's gold, but not his counsel. The strange discussion in Act V Scene II seems to confirm Alcibiades intended to test Timon's loyalties. We are told he sent a courier to offer Timon to join him in his conquest of Athens, likely as a kind of sympathetic figurehead to the injustice of the senate, but also in his capacity as a former military man of some standing.

Although we see a considerable love of honour in Alcibiades' pursuit of power, the key to his tyrannical ambition seems to lay in his perversion of *eros* that manifests itself through his various personal eccentricities. He cannot help himself but to invite a throng of prostitutes to a nobleman's banquet, and brings more along for his conquest of Athens. He calls Timon noble, but then allows the prostitutes to badger him and beg for money. Shakespeare invites us to question whether Alcibiades poses a permanent solution to the city's corruption, or is not in fact the completion of its democratic corruption, the turn to tyranny.<sup>243</sup> With neither side able to use Timon for their own purposes, the issue becomes one of Alcibiades against Athens.

The courier, it turns out, is actually a soldier in Alcibiades' company and he arrives to find Timon already dead. Since Alcibiades knew that man's presence but "offends" Timon, it is curious he should send another message to him shortly after running into him in the woods. When Timon needed Alcibiades' help the most, he was nowhere to be found. Now that he needs nothing, Alcibiades goes out of his way to reinforce his affection and desire for him to join in the conquest of Athens.

Alcibiades, the invading tyrant, needs popular support in order to make his authority

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<sup>243</sup> Plato. (1968) Republic, 573b. USA: Basic Books. Plato describes the liberal excesses of society that come to define the tyrant. The entirety of Book IX is quite interesting in its many applications to the Athenian city Shakespeare shows us. We might also look to Book VIII's proclamation that "too much freedom seems to change into nothing but too much slavery" as well as the description of the movement from democracy to tyranny. (562-564)

last. Aristotle tells us that the demagogue proceeds in his takeover of democracy by forging false accusations to incite the common people.<sup>244</sup> Alcibiades will falsely accuse his enemies of having done Timon some monstrous wrong, even though we have clearly demonstrated Shakespeare did not see Timon in such a noble and benevolent light.<sup>245</sup> Here we see that Alcibiades is not terribly concerned whether Timon lives or dies, so long as he is no longer allowed to speak on his own behalf. He must either join Alcibiades or be silenced. Timon's radical misanthropy would destroy him as a sympathetic figure before the Athenian people. If they see the real Timon, he can no longer tell the lie that he was viscerously wronged by ravenous usurers, because Timon has already said that he curses all innocents with the same fervour as those that directly did him wrong. He lives only to see all Athenians hang themselves. One suspects Alcibiades greatly prefers Timon dead than alive, for he can use his image "hereafter" to provoke all kinds of emotions amongst the many.

Alcibiades' reading of the epitaph is a masterful presentation of his ability to control Timon's image so that he might be used for the tyrant's political gain. It is often noted that the epitaph provides support for the unfinished nature of the play because Timon's words seem to contradict themselves as to whether or not he wants his name to be made known. Shakespeare, it is said, was simply confused and meant to omit one of the messages at a later date.<sup>246</sup> Yet I think the text suggests it is not Shakespeare who is contradictory, but Timon. Does not all the evidence of the play

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<sup>244</sup> Aristotle (no. 24) pp.155: 1305a

<sup>245</sup> R. Swigg (1967) "Timon of Athens and the Growth of Discrimination" *RES* 62, pp. 387-394 ; See also Chapter 6.

<sup>246</sup> A.D. Nuttall (1989) *Timon of Athens*, pp.137. Toronto: Harvester Wheatsheaf. Nuttall cites the New Arden editors and seems to agree with them. His analysis of the meaning of the epitaphs is excellent, I merely offer the possibility that Shakespeare includes both accounts in order to reinforce the contradictory character of Timon's existence.

point to Timon's bitter confusion and contradictory character? He loves all men, and then he hates all men. As Timon engraves the first message that says "seek not my name" we see lines completely in synch with his final state of misanthropy. Seeing what he wrote, however, could easily have provoked Timon's lofty feelings regarding his reputation and the need to make beautiful speeches. His momentary feeling of deep remorse with Flavius is all the evidence we need that Timon remained a very divided man until the very end. (Timon, 4.3.490) He cannot die without engraving a new message, in language accessible to even the most common of men. The first message focuses on the wretched nature of Timon himself, is not written in the common tongue, and does not mention his name. The second focuses on the awfulness of those that hated and mistreated him, and specifically does give his name. The double epitaph speaks to the double life that Timon lived. Surrounded by sophistry and corrupted flatterers, he was never sure who was worse, himself or his fellow man. In the end, his contradiction points to 'both' as the answer, and Alcibiades as the most popular political solution. The demagogue ascends to tyranny to cure the ills of the divided and listless democracy.

Alcibiades must be careful in presenting Timon's message to the people, in the same way that Antony must be careful with Caesar's. Alcibiades must provide some sense of sympathy for the mistreatment of Timon without presenting him as simply virtuous as such. It is not by Timon's hand that Athens shall be saved, but his own. It is in Alcibiades' best interests to stir the passions of the many without giving them recourse to question his own authority. Alcibiades alone is great and just. When the second message says that all men hated Timon, Alcibiades says nothing to correct this

opinion except to say that it sounds very much like Timon's "latter spirits". (Timon, 5.4.70) He then reminds us of Timon's faults, saying he hated the very basis of our common humanity because it flowed from our essentially ungenerous natures. True as this may be, Alcibiades claims in his soliloquy that man's nature is angry, not generous. Where was Alcibiades when Timon was most in need of him, when the creditors may have been swayed by an ounce of his rage? It was Timon's extraordinarily high opinion of himself that led the gods to weep for him, but Alcibiades does not weep. He calls such "rich conceit" a "fault forgiven". There is only room for one man in Athens who thinks extraordinarily high of himself, and he has just conquered Athens. Whatever lesson may be learned from Timon may be "hereafter" controlled and disseminated, but no more will be said now. Timon comes out looking sympathetic, but not great. It is only Alcibiades, the chameleon, that comes out looking great.

Unlike the critics that see Alcibiades triumph as resolving the problems in Athens, I do not believe we have any good reasons for thinking this is so.<sup>247</sup>

Alcibiades says:

And I will use the olive with my sword,  
 Make war breed peace, make peace stint war, make each  
 Prescribe to other as each other's leech.  
 Let our drums strike. (Timon, 5.4.80)

Firstly, the events of the play give us absolutely no reason to believe what Alcibiades says here about peace. The entire play he has spoken in the language of cannibalism

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<sup>247</sup> This is the most prevalent scholarly rendition of the ending. See for ex: F. W. Brownlow (1977) *Two Shakespearean Sequences: Henry VI Richard II Pericles Timon of Athens*, pp. 216-32. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. Hanna (no. 21) thinks Alcibiades means to end the process at "peace", a conclusion without support in the play or in history.

and violence, was enraged because the senate refused to release his murderous, rioting friend, and has now attacked his own country where he will uphold the call to “approach the fold and cull the infected forth”. The need to murder one’s own people in order to bring about some measure of order is to Alcibiades pragmatic, to the audience it should be horrible. Alcibiades has been given absolute power until the full extent of his rage is extinguished, how deep does it run? These are dangerous times. There is absolutely no indication that Alcibiades intends this to be a bloodless revolution and every reason to think otherwise. Even the words, “prescribe to other as each other’s leech” suggests that war too will cling to peace as its counterpart; violence remains an essential compliment to peace. Part of this attack, as the senators make clear, will be the slaughter of Alcibiades’ fellow Athenians. Till this day, the senators had made their wills the “scope of justice”, but now it is Alcibiades whose will shall rule. Shakespeare invites us to see how the corrupted democracy clamours for great men to restore it to order, but that in doing so democracy also opens itself up to an even more destructive tyranny.

Alcibiades appeals to Athens by saying all men will bow before the law and that all will be tried justly, precisely the principles he opposed in the court scene. He exempts himself from the city. He is above it. Shakespeare makes it very telling that Alcibiades says very little in fond memory of Timon. His invasion puts himself above the laws of the city and above the ties of men, while Timon is, in a sense, below them. In the context of the play his takeover means that the solution to the corruption of Athens is not to reform men’s souls, but to enslave them to the power of absolute rule. Shakespeare moves in a cyclical pattern, the next movement begins with *Coriolanus*

where the people are fed up with despotic rule and demand change. The contempt Coriolanus feels for the common man descends from the contempt Alcibiades has for the gods and law. This play runs directly into the Roman trilogy. For Shakespeare, the problems of Rome run all the way back to Athens. The best that may be said about Athenians here is that there are amongst them servants who are honest, but not wise. The senators do not care about their democracy, they care only for their own self-preservation. It is this all-encompassing spirit of degradation that Timon tapped in to, but his hatred for humanity ran so deep it included even himself. In the end his epitaph proves no possibility for spiritual or political reform, only spite born of a sophist gone mad.

The specific historical anachronism appears to give the ending an allegorical flourish. Alcibiades never historically attacked his own country, but he did gain a considerable amount of control over the military power of Athens. Such control is brought to an abrupt halt when he is recalled for the desecration of the Hermei, which I think Shakespeare gives us good reason to suspect he will go on to do. Alcibiades defiles, outrages, and thinks himself a god. Alcibiades has a kind of empathy for man, and may even have actually cared about Timon, but he is not at all against putting such considerations aside for the triumph of his own personal glory and power. He is a constant reminder for our own times, when the sophists of the age make it difficult to tell the difference between benevolence and sophistry, statesmen and demagogues.

## Chapter 8: Concluding Remarks

If I have contributed anything to the field of Shakespearean interpretation, I should hope it is in some small way of benefit in answering Allan Bloom's rhetorical question from the *Closing of the American Mind*, what does Shakespeare have to do with solving our problems?<sup>248</sup> In my introduction, I have shown how important it is to exhaust every effort to read Shakespeare the way he wanted to be read, to understand him the way he understood himself, and to read him as closely and as open minded as we would Plato. Most Straussian writers are unwilling to attach themselves to any kind of theoretical basis upon which to read Shakespeare in this manner, but I see good reason to explore authors like Nuttall in order to ensure this method of reading Shakespeare can remain part of modern philosophic and literary conversations. The method of close reading can and must pass both common sense and methodological tests. As I hope to have demonstrated, this method can in fact be enriched by engaging with existing literary and critical interpretations as an avenue to 'turning around' the conversation toward the author's original intention.

In my view it is not enough to merely reject modern scholarship outright, we should be able to 'speak the language of the modern young' in doing so, lest we risk further decay of what is called traditional political philosophy. We can easily avoid the cynical approach of an Apemantus in our philosophic presentation of Shakespeare, but to persuade the young as successfully as Socrates takes considerable skill. The modern

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<sup>248</sup> Bloom, A. (1987) *Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing. P. 353

young are interested, perhaps more than ever, in questions of God and politics, but the veritable collection of personal baggage that accompanies that conversation is also larger than ever. Condensing Shakespeare to merely a mouthpiece for Platonic political philosophy is neither as exciting nor truthful as an interpretive approach that shows both the kinship inherent in their goals as well as the importance of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Plato's reformation of the Homeric gods is a reasonable starting place for understanding his views on how to create a religion that honours a God or gods in line with his understanding of the healthy tripartite soul. Everything in Plato comes back to the healthy political soul – and this is the true secret of the kinship he shares with Shakespeare.

The particular differences inherent in the demonstration of political, religious, poetic and philosophic lives of Plato and Shakespeare's characters are of considerably less concern once the standard of the healthy soul is accounted for and agreed upon. I have shown, in a variety of different ways, how this one point of essential agreement leads logically into fascinating agreements and disagreements on those very interesting particularities. The discussion of these particularities, and the valuation of their ultimate place in the grand scheme of the world, is what constitute meaningful philosophic dialogue – but always with the caveat that Shakespeare's genius never succumbs to the temptation of explaining or reducing itself to first principles. Shakespeare begins in the middle, as a poet might, where Plato prefers to start from the beginning. Plato's reduction of all things to first principles only takes the conversations in the *Republic* so far into the middle; we never quite get to see how the principles of political life he constructs will play themselves out in the world we know. Shakespeare begins from the

middle, allowing himself only fleeting moments of poetic reflection on the beginning and the end. We see how the world plays out, but not necessarily how or why. We know, like Plato, that he believes that the rational part of the soul should lead. Unlike Plato, it is evident that Shakespeare's understanding of the healthy rational soul has a much larger place reserved for a range of poetic expression.

The intersections of Plato and Shakespeare that occur in the middle, in Shakespeare's presentation of the history of the world, are positively invigorating to uncover and can be used as the basis upon which to excite the situation of the modern young. The sex, murder, betrayal and honour we see in the plays themselves can be grounded in the philosophy of Plato, to the mutual benefit of both. Plato allows us to speak, even minimally, about Shakespeare's philosophy. TS Eliot clearly desired to raise the bar of Shakespearean criticism and begin again the project of connecting the dots between the plays to make statements about Shakespeare's vision of the whole, or what we may call Shakespearean wisdom. In this work I believe I have made strides in doing so, albeit with the important caveat that ultimately Shakespeare remains more enigmatic in this regard than even Plato. What is evident is that Shakespeare very clearly sees the unity of comedy and tragedy as an essential element in the truth about man and his place in the universe, which is both in line with what Socrates requests in the *Symposium* and a significant statement that tends toward a philosophic insight in its own right. If Shakespeare could speak on this, might he have suggested the marriage of Sophocles and Aristophanes as his ultimate secret? What Plato suggests but cannot demonstrate, Shakespeare demonstrates but does not suggest. Perhaps this is *his* genius?

In speaking of the failure to address the situation of the modern young, Bloom wonders why the humanities no longer seek to support the “kinds of questions children ask: Is there a God? Is there freedom? Is there punishment for evil deeds? Is there certain knowledge? What is a good society?”<sup>249</sup> These are questions I have taken up in this work, and in saying that Shakespeare has answers to these questions I am saying he partakes in something like political philosophy. As I have shown, his plays strongly indicate answers to these questions, albeit answers that stop short of sweeping universal statements. In Chapter 2, I undertake a close reading of Plato's *Republic* from the perspective of someone interested specifically in the question of the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. By taking what Socrates says very seriously, and not necessarily stressing the irony of the work as a whole or how he may contradict himself in certain ways, I hope to have inserted myself into an argument about art itself in a meaningful way. I should hope it becomes difficult for others to read these passages now and not think about Shakespeare – or how other ‘poets’ may fit with Plato’s desire to educate the young anew.

It's clear the battle for an almost unlimited freedom of expression in art has been fought and won, but it is not just that battle which should intrigue us. Socrates wisely shows us that only by asking what we mean when we talk about the good society, or the best society, can we possibly expect to arrive at an answer about the best kind of art. We hear modern commentators and young people all too frequently aghast at the notion of ‘censorship’, and yet it is only from an idea about the good regime as such that censorship can be shown to be right or wrong. The promotion of public opinion as a virtue in its own right that comes along with the adoption of democracy does not

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid p.372

necessarily entail the parallel adoption of all values becoming equal. This is a battle that is still being waged, regardless of the number of hollow volumes that might pack modern store shelves. In saying that yes, Shakespeare would be admitted back into the city in speech, I am very clearly saying that he is the best poet because he understands, contextualizes, and shows different possible answers to the most important questions of political philosophy. The important questions of political philosophy are questions about what it means to be human and how or why the city and man might organize itself. The good regime follows the healthy soul. I am suggesting that good art should proceed in this manner, and that it is ok for us to say so. Social science may no longer ask, 'what is a just ruler?' but Shakespeare does. And this is a question the modern young are still very much interested in. Not only does Shakespeare ask these questions and deal with them with the utmost seriousness, he does so in a way that is far more accessible than most philosophy.

In Chapter 3, I hope that I have made some progress in demonstrating the value of understanding Plato's tripartite division of the soul when approaching Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Shakespeare brings a vivid richness to his creation of characters that clearly show the consequences both in private and public life for men and women who are not lead by reason properly understood. It's clear that he is as pessimistic about the possibility of such reasonable human beings leading political life over any significant span of time as is Plato, and that too is important here. The cyclical nature of regimes and the symbiotic relationship between tyranny of the soul and tyranny of the city are as well demonstrated in Shakespeare as anywhere else. It is hard to imagine Plato ultimately approving of a great deal of what Shakespeare brings to life on stage in this

regard, but he does not have to. He merely need recognize its significance, which I argue he would, and through that common understanding of the soul the two can be seated together at the common table of politics representing the seats of poetry and philosophy.

Chapter 4 is really a continuation of the themes prevalent throughout the discussion of the tripartite soul, with a specific emphasis on how Plato and Shakespeare understood music and poetry to be key animating forces in love, politics, and war. The magnificence with which Hamlet discusses imitative poetry and its clear link to *The Republic* should remind us how earnestly Shakespeare wants to understand his own profession. He takes seriously questions about the utility of drama when faced with overwhelming political pressure – so he retreats in his way to dealing with the very real political issues of his day through the half-invention of a Danish prince. The somewhat stilted discussion on subjectivism here is meant primarily as a counter to modern commentators who refuse to make claims about the pedagogical, instructional, or instinctual effects of music on the minds of the young. Both Shakespeare and Plato hold firm to the belief that music is an indispensable educational tool, and is crucial to the healthy development of the city and man. Music has never held a higher position in society than it does at present, and I think there is general agreement here about the very real opportunities and risks this poses to a liberal education. The varieties of musical expression are like the many voices of democracy, and I hope we can engage the young in this arena as a means of investigating these themes.

In Chapter 5, Shakespeare's Gods, it is clear that Shakespeare indicates the necessity of faith in protecting political value – but he ultimately does not take a stand regarding what exactly that faith must be. Shakespeare is very clearly not what we

would recognize in Elizabethan times, or even our own, as an 'orthodox' Christian, but he consciously decided to put significant emphasis on the roles of compassion, love and marriage in the development of a healthy society. However much I hope to have reimagined our understanding of Hecate and the witches in *Macbeth*, I see no path to an argument that the end result for Shakespeare is traditional Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic. There is too much pagan sympathy, too much irreverence, and far too little Christ. Did Shakespeare believe in God? I think we are given good reason in this chapter, and elsewhere, to believe he thought such belief very important.

Did Shakespeare believe that the Christ of mercy, neighbourly love, and compassion is the best representation of divinity available to him? I hesitate to speak for Shakespeare here, and he appears to have been prohibited from outright demonstration of his religious views, however much he very clearly knows the Bible inside and out. It is hard to imagine, however, that the same Shakespeare who wrote *Titus Andronicus* believed hard and fast in a literal interpretation of the Biblical word. His creative and literary imagination stretches beyond the borders of what we find in Homer or the Bible, and in this sense he is anything but an orthodox 'believer of the faith'. And yet it is also clear that he does not stray too far from a belief in the many benefits that Christian reconciliation and love hold over the Homeric virtues. He importantly arrives at this conclusion through Platonic argument, not revelation as such. Whether this conclusion springs from a kind of political utilitarianism or genuine spiritual belief is impossible to pin down, which far from being a problem here is part of the excitement of Shakespeare.

In Chapter 6 and 7 I tasked myself with undertaking a close reading of a play that has been disregarded by most Shakespearean critics as incomplete, ingenuine, and

unworthy of further study. On first read, *Timon of Athens* does tend to read like a dress rehearsal for the madness and beauty found in *King Lear*, and in some respects this is still true. But what we do find in *Timon* is a carefully crafted treatise on friendship and tyranny that is quite unlike anything else in the Shakespearean corpus. Plato's concern with true friendship and its necessary connection with a successful form of political philosophy is, for me, one of the most important cornerstones of his teaching and Shakespeare does a spectacularly interesting job of bringing this tension between friendship and flattery to light. It does not hurt that Shakespeare felt inclined to include another mocking salute to Socrates in the character of Apemantus and a delicate rewriting of Athenian history in his Alcibiades. By engaging directly with existing interpretive efforts I have spent considerable time showing the corrective influence a close reading of the play can have. The vast majority of attempts to tie *Timon of Athens* to political theory are thinly veiled attempts to make Shakespeare simply the mouthpiece for an author's own particular political bent. In showing how both Marxists and Straussians are prone to this particular problem in this particular play, perhaps this can serve as a roadmap to similarly correcting interpretive approaches to other works. It is my hope that the chapter on Alcibiades, however brief, may offer some value to those authors who have something important to say about the differences between classical and modern tyranny.

While I have spent the majority of this project sewing the threads of Shakespeare and Plato ever closer together, it is now necessary for me to conclude by pulling gently at the cloth and unravelling some of the stitching. At the risk of stating the obvious, great poetry is necessarily particular as opposed to universal. From truly great art of the particular, universal claims can often be made, but this is not simply the intention of

Shakespeare's genius and this is not a fault. To the extent poetry has attempted to make universal claims about the city and man, this usually indicates either bad poetry or 'elevation' in priority to religious treatise. I believe I have shown in many ways how much the academic world has to gain by understanding Shakespeare in light of Plato, but in the final analysis they are not the same. Plato is a fine and interesting poet when he tries to be, but not a great one. Shakespeare loves to tap into the intelligence and breadth of human philosophy, but he is not a philosopher and does not really try to be, despite the best efforts of his best characters.

In Santayana's *Poetry and Religion*, he calls the "Poetry of Barbarism" that art which erupts from the man "who regards his passions as their own excuse for being; who does not domesticate them either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their ideal goal."<sup>250</sup> On this sort of barbarism, both in their own times and ours, Shakespeare and Plato are in perfect accord. By holding a view of the end of a thing, as well as its beginning, man is in a far better position to argue for the healthy and life affirming alignment of passion, spirit, and reason. Without a consideration of the whole, man tends toward some corruption of balance between the three and the various personal and political follies of existence have subsequently manifested themselves into the great (and small) political tragedies of history. This process continues. While we may not take Plato entirely at his word in the *Republic* when he claims that the ills of the world would cease if kings became philosophers or philosophers became kings, it is clear that statement is meant to be universal in its application and can be demonstrated as having

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<sup>250</sup> Santayana, G. (1900) *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*. New York: Charles Scribners Sons. p 176. While Santayana makes very interesting remarks about the passivity of Shakespeare's religion, he also calls him a highly irrational poet who is prone to enlightened gibberish.

appreciable value in a meaningful understanding of any particular Socratic dialogue, as well as an attempt to understand the whole of Plato's work. He may at times contradict the end value of that statement both inside and outside the *Republic* itself, and there is merited discussion around the eventual revolt of the timocrats as well as how to interpret what sort of philosopher Plato means to indicate (Socratic or Platonic) is best.

Nevertheless, the statement retains the force of its meaning in terms of philosophic universality. There can be no question that Plato values the philosophic life above all others.

For Shakespeare, this is most certainly not the case. An argument may be made that a philosophic kind of existence is the best possible life for man, but nowhere does either Shakespeare or one of his characters make this claim. For Shakespeare, there is no universal statement we can take forward as the demonstration *par excellence* of the Shakespearean vision for man, never mind enter into an entire philosophic discipline centered around the validity or interpretative value of the claim itself. Shakespeare is rather closer in this sense to someone like Whitman, who hazards an answer to the quintessential Platonic problem of the “eyes that vainly crave the light” and the cities “fill'd with the foolish” by saying simply “That you are here – that life exists and identity, that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.”<sup>251</sup> As it goes with the quality of that verse, with the extent to which it represents a realistic portrayal of the highs and lows of the human soul, so too does that verse tend to be remembered and revered. The vision of how things may have been different, how tragedies may have been avoided, or how the city itself may rise above the ashes of petty factionism and conceit

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<sup>251</sup> Whitman, W. (1881) *Leaves of Grass*. “O Me! O Life!” 7<sup>th</sup> Edition Boston: Osgood Publishing. p.215

never rises to the occasion in Shakespeare as any one universal vision or answer. In his preference for the particular, does he not rather share something with Aristotle?

As I have argued here, Shakespeare's plays tend towards responses to political problems that share much in common with Plato, but they very meaningfully stop short. Shakespeare evades a unitary construction of humanity, universality, and a concreteness of vision much more purposefully than does Plato. For Shakespeare, the problems of historicism and subjectivity inherent in modern philosophy have already begun to creep in, however much he tries to reject them. Through Shakespeare's eyes we see political life change, and we see the type of men and structures of authority at the forefront of political decisions vary drastically between time periods. A man like Richard II or even Hamlet could not conceivably exist in Shakespeare's Rome, such a disjuncture would have to wait for Twain. But what we do see, very clearly, is Shakespeare reject the claim that the problems of man have been somehow altered through the historical process. He shows us the shape of government and how man acts as his relation to power shifts, but that the emotions and feelings associated with man's place in the universe have not changed. Shakespeare attains universality through a poetic engagement with the particular, never the universal as such. Socrates, as Plato constructs him, can live as he does in the dialogues anywhere and always. His humanity is universal, his approach timeless.

Shakespeare, greater than any man since, demonstrates the marks of human character with which we continue to struggle in our daily lives. Those marks have political repercussions, sometimes very explicit ones. Shakespeare does not merely construct men and women for the purpose of demonstrating some particular problem or

value, but so thoroughly understands human nature itself that his characters seem to create their own internal consistency and vibrancy. They are spacious - we as the audience can inhabit them, try on their consciousness, and feel what they feel. His best characters are so well constructed that they seem to make problems for themselves. The popularity of Shakespeare attests to the frequency with which this occurs. None but the most sublime philosophic soul can inhabit the character of Socrates, and even then, what would they feel? Nietzsche seemed to feel an immense kind of resentment at having even tried. Socrates owing a "cock to Asclepius" on his deathbed seems to be more of a joke or cruel irony than a genuine attempt at communicating human feeling. Socrates loved his students, that much is clear, and through an engagement with the Platonic dialogues we may feel in passing some sense of love and belonging, but the sensation soon fades. Through Socrates, and perhaps philosophy as such, we can see love on the horizon but I am not sure it can be touched through the hazy chill. In great poetry, and so in Shakespeare, you cannot escape feeling surrounded by the enormity of raw human emotion. In the comedies we rejoice and bask in the love of our companions, and in the tragedies we feel the sort of sorrow that makes us appreciate and come closer to those we love. This is impossible through Socrates alone.

Only if Shakespeare were somehow able to translate the feelings we experience through an appreciation of the particular to an interpretation of the meaning of life as a whole could the two thinkers somehow be bridged. But Shakespeare possessed no such interpretation and no such answer. It is not even clear he would have wanted to; I do not see any way to intelligently speak of a Shakespearean philosophy as such. Shakespeare's greatest thinkers grasp at the eternal questions of man, searching for illumination in the

darkest depths of the human soul, but they remain firmly rooted in the particular. Lear searches for some larger truth about the definite problems of human relationships and political life, yet he represents but one strange type among the varieties of human character. As he becomes the man in the woods who feels love and despair, he loses his quality of kingship. Can the philosopher king truly love his children?

Hamlet's posturing to the universe, whatever the interpretive value of his reflections, do not appear to have an outcome. There is no Shakespearean position on the philosophic arguments Hamlet presents. This does not devalue or denigrate Shakespeare in the slightest, nor does it make him a nihilist. Opening up the greatest questions of man without a definite answer but within the confines of a common moral understanding is what constitutes him as a poet and thinker in his own right. In refusing to pass universal conclusions about the best way of life, or how this life may be achieved, Shakespeare accomplishes an art of unsurpassed value in the consideration of the Platonic argument for philosophy. Only in literature with the richness and particularity of Shakespeare can we hold a mirror to Plato's words to see what remains.

Where political philosophy rightly understood tends to correct the partiality of the particular with a view towards that which understands the relations between all particularities, poetry in the Shakespearean sense rejects this attempt not as unworthy, but as a distinct enterprise. Philosophy makes the attempt to contribute to human knowledge an ideal by which we can understand and evaluate the standard of totality, while poetry contributes an ideal by which we understand ourselves through the particular, and through that process perhaps aim at more. But that something more always remains for Shakespeare an elusive prospect, while for Plato everything is an attempt to reconcile the

particular with an understanding of all. When we read *Hamlet* or *King Lear* we are taking a view of our own personal selves, our own faults, our hopes and our ambitions through the lens of a master genius. Such is rarely the case with Plato – we tend to read him much more fruitfully as the key to understanding the nature of the city and man of which we might also belong.

That said, the man whose soul is properly ordered according to the proportionality of reason, spirit, and appetite in Shakespeare would be well received by Plato. The poet can be welcomed back into the city by justifying his position in it. Shakespeare can more vividly demonstrate the possibilities of the well-ordered soul in both personal and political life than Plato ever dared to do. For Plato this would be folly, for the inevitability of corruption in any particular human soul would belie the futility of examining the ideal. Shakespeare is not shy in showing both the virtue and downfall of good men, nor of tyrants. Nietzsche is surely right to say that some of Shakespeare's most beautiful moments arise when we consider the sheer enormity of spirit contained within Shakespeare's most vile and despicable creations. They are like sheer forces of will. Also like Nietzsche, Shakespeare thinks it humorous and important to show how silly the philosopher appears in the light of actual human polity, something he holds much more in common with Aristophanes than Plato. Shakespeare did not see it fit to recreate Socrates anywhere in his plays, and most likely thought such a feat impossible. And even if he could, to whom would he converse in a manner that is both convincing and entertaining to be staged? The Socrates we meet through Plato is hardly a man at all. But by drawing attention to certain elements of the Socratic lifestyle, however incomplete, in characters like Apemantus, Hamlet, and Falstaff, we are given serious

reason to question whether the pursuit of the philosophic life is indeed best. He may agree that it is highest, but perhaps not best. Shakespeare's lovers can attest to this.

Bloom claims philosophy “once proudly proclaimed that it was the best way of life, and it dared to survey the whole, to seek the first causes of all things, and not only dictated its rules to the special sciences but constituted and ordered them.”<sup>252</sup> This is precisely what Shakespeare does not do, although he dives into each of these constitutive elements of what Bloom calls philosophy and has much to say about each, never emerging from the elements to make any statements about the character of the whole. In part, this is what I have done, and thus I have utilized Shakespeare's insight for the end of political philosophy, which has the inverse effect of making the plays more lively and prone for discussion. In part, I hope, to invigorate such texts for the situation of the modern young.

If we return to Jaffa's remark that “Only Strauss could have led me to see that Shakespeare's inner and ultimate motivation was Platonic”, we may now pause a little to wonder whether this is precisely the case or not. As I have demonstrated, Shakespeare is clearly inspired by a Platonic motivation throughout his work, but I hesitate to find any evidence that this was somehow his “ultimate motivation”, unless we are willing to make subsequent claims about Platonic motivation and Christianity. The poet can be welcomed back into the city in speech without succumbing completely to the desire to be just like Socrates. The good poet cannot succeed without engaging with Socrates, without understanding how his view of human nature and its constitutive elements inform political life, but there is no desire on Shakespeare's behalf to stop there. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. There is more

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<sup>252</sup> Closing of the American mind p.377

excitement, more fiery passion in the love and longing that graces Shakespeare's pages than we ever even hear about in Plato.

Politically speaking, Shakespeare showed tremendous interest in the history of England; his plays trace the movement of England from a decentralized, feudal monarchy to a centralized, modern monarchy that he lived in under Elizabeth. The concentration of power prevalent in the Tudor dynasty could very well have influenced Shakespeare's characterizations of their historical opponents, but his situation of political greatness as such is not disturbed by the politics of the time. Whether we agree, for example, with the historical accuracy of say Shakespeare's retelling of *Richard III* is less important than the movement through time he demonstrates and the character of the political souls that create said movement.

One cannot escape the Machiavellian implications of Shakespeare's history plays. Unlike his more fantastical plays which allow Shakespeare to explore the very depths of the human soul, and also the constituent elements of which make greatness possible, the history plays concentrate more on the surface of things, on that which 'seems to be so'. The art of seeming was important to Machiavelli, and so too Shakespeare. While the outcome of the English history plays is never in doubt, it is Shakespeare's uncanny ability to raise questions about the permanency of an order based on an unprecedented concentration of political power that never totally dissipate from an otherwise "Pro-Tudor" account. One not need be "Pro-Tudor" to say that the end result of the transformation of England that occurred under their watch, however brutal, was undoubtedly positive. Whether or not Shakespeare was co-opted into participating in or promoting any kind of supposed "Tudor Myth" is irrelevant. Unlike the plays which are

more of Shakespeare's own creation, no God or gods show up granting Henry VII the divine right of unlimited political power. This fact alone, when viewed in light of the whole of Shakespeare's work which often includes such 'Excalibur' like moments, is telling. It is for Shakespeare as it was for Strauss, "To speak differently to different people may be said to be irony in the proper sense of the word."<sup>253</sup>

The art of questioning what appears on the surface, of partaking in the activity of political philosophy, receives tremendous and perhaps unrivalled literary support in readings of Shakespeare. The nuanced and layered conversations that result from the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities open to the keen student of Shakespeare is enough to ignite the fire of liberal education in the situation of the modern young. When Bloom worries about the apolitical character of what has become of the humanities, he is really concerned about what effect that apolitical character has on actual young people. Not in theory, but in practice. Similarly, I do not suppose simply to have demonstrated a theoretical kinship to be explored between Shakespeare and Plato, but rather an invigoration of both in practice as a result of such kinship.

It is not enough for the academy to oppose modern tyranny, it must enable its students to recognize an abuse of power in light of its opposite form, justice. Bloom is concerned that the withdrawal of politics from the humanities creates a similar withdrawal in the soul of the young that could be easily filled with a politics that is "the most vulgar, extreme and current... Humanists ran like lemmings into the sea, thinking they would refresh and revitalize themselves in it. They drowned."<sup>254</sup> The humanities must come out of the sea with more than a warning of impending despair. It must bring a

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<sup>253</sup> Strauss, L. (1964) *The City and Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p.51

<sup>254</sup> *Closing of the American Mind* p.153

message of hope – behold tyranny! Join us and we will discuss the history of power and war. That is a message the modern young can and will gravitate to.

Whereas Hobbes opposes the poets for their potential to create less than desirable free thinking citizens, Plato opposes them for their tendency to create tyrannical souls. Each are concerned about the impact of imitation on the souls of the many – but from somewhat opposite perspectives. The danger Plato foresaw in imitative poetry has not changed over the last two thousand years. Modern poetry, in its various forms, still extols “tyranny as a condition equal to that of a god” but it can also demonstrate the successes and strengths of personal and political moderation. More than this, it can show, as Shakespeare does, that the ‘successes’ of the tyrannical soul are fleeting. Tyranny is not a pathway to the good political regime. In this sense Plato and Shakespeare are in perfect accord, and the humanities can and should participate in criticism of modern artistic efforts that do so. Identification of modern forms of tyranny is another issue entirely, and further work is required in order to bridge ongoing efforts to identify tyranny with discussions about whether Plato and Shakespeare continue to be helpful guides.

The misstep that political philosophy must overcome in relation to its use of Shakespeare is the tendency to dwell on a single work as being entirely representative of the whole, yet paradoxically there is scarce little promise in linking every play and sonnet toward one unified vision. There is no ‘Republic’ of the Shakespearean corpus, nor does there need to be. In *What is Political Philosophy* Strauss says that when “men make it their explicit goal to acquire knowledge of the good life and of the good society, political philosophy emerges...The theme of political philosophy is mankind’s great objectives, freedom and government or empire – objectives which are capable of lifting all men

beyond their poor selves.”<sup>255</sup> By taking a view of the whole of Shakespeare, as T.S. Eliot attempted to do, we may stop short of the conclusion that Shakespeare’s plays themselves partake in the activity of “acquiring knowledge of the good life” but they certainly do partake in the themes of political philosophy as such. It may be said, in fact, that while Plato’s great success lies in the investigation of that knowledge, Shakespeare’s lay in the unfolding of that knowledge’s associated character. Shakespeare is undoubtedly able to assist in lifting all men beyond themselves, but the question of ‘towards what?’ inevitably requires a view of the whole.

The sheer variety of style and conscious fusion of comedy and tragedy that pervades Shakespeare’s greatest efforts is both what constitutes his genius while preventing concrete interpretation as to the cohesive meaning of that genius. For all his irony and doubleness of speech, Plato is easier to ‘pin down’ than is the Bard. None more than T.S. Eliot struggled with the desire to understand the whole of Shakespeare, and as such Eliot’s opinion of the artist appeared to fluctuate between adulation and disgust. Eliot claimed that about someone so great as Shakespeare it is probable that we can never be right, “and if we can never be right, it is better than we should from time to time change our way of being wrong.” Following Eliot’s lead, I believe this work has shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that Shakespeare consulted Plato as a literary reference point, and as a wellspring of foundational philosophic wisdom upon which all of his work inevitably points toward. When Shakespeare wants to show us a defect in character, he adapts Plato’s depiction of the balanced tripartite soul in order to make his point clear and the character come alive. If this does nothing else than pave a way ahead for scholars to change our way of being wrong about Shakespeare, so be it. Engaging

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<sup>255</sup> Strauss, L. (1959) *What is Political Philosophy?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. P.10

with Shakespeare was a lifelong labour of love for Eliot, and by the end of his career he was ready to claim, “For the understanding of Shakespeare, a lifetime is not too long; and of Shakespeare, the development of one’s opinions may be the measure of one’s development in wisdom.”<sup>256</sup>

For this author, the development of my wisdom runs in conjunction with an ability to confront Plato about the banishment and return of the artists to the polis. At some point we must wonder, is it better to censor imitative art altogether so as not to run the risk of corrupting the souls of the young, or relinquish ourselves of the artists altogether as Hobbes might have it? Is there any difference between censorship and banishment? Where Plato leaves room, however narrow, for a poet to demonstrate his utility to the growth and maturation of the healthy political regime, Hobbes insistence on subservience to the science of natural justice prevents any appeal on the poet’s behalf. If Hobbes is wrong and there is no science of natural justice upon which all men must serve, then we in fact require artists to shake us from our preconceived notions about political reality in order to grasp at the truth. We do not simply wake up one day from within the cave. Plato’s concern about the corruption of the young is irrelevant if art serves only order. Is it not better to be corrupted and free than whole but subservient to something admittedly unconcerned with knowledge for its own sake?

Political philosophy as Plato and Strauss understand it is all but inaccessible to the many, while imitative art is more popular than ever. We need not be so rigid as to demand the fight against Hobbesian modernity begin and end with Shakespeare, indeed to insist as such would be folly. But the essence of the Shakespearean poet, in the intersections between poetry and philosophy, this is where an argument for the modern

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<sup>256</sup> Harding, J. (2012) T.S. Eliot’s Shakespeare. *Essays in Criticism*. Vol 62 (2):160-177.

artist can be made. The earnest quest for knowledge, truth, and justice have all but disappeared from the mind of the modern poet – replaced as it were by passion, sophistry, revenge and despair. The rejection of Christian idealism has left our artists stuck in a distinctly Homeric age, which for both Plato and Shakespeare required reformation rather than rejection. To revisit modern poetry in relation to the situation of the modern young we must be willing to claim that there is such a thing as the good society, vile tyranny, and greatness of soul. Both Plato and Shakespeare knew that controversy and sex were big sellers, and they did not disagree that they must serve a higher purpose. It is in the disagreement about the extent to which that higher purpose must pervade every component of a truly good work that the philosophic dialogue can continue. But that dialogue can and should begin from a general agreement about the existence of something which can be called True.

It is clear Shakespeare subjected his poetry to a form of moral and political supervision befitting the title of the good poet. The good poet who is welcomed back into the city is the master of both comedy and tragedy, and is welcome at the table of the *Symposium*. That there are no radically free, happy and successful characters in Shakespeare reaffirms, at a minimum, that conformance to some measure of moral and political pattern is what makes men whole or complete. As in Plato, there is no strict rigidity as to what that pattern will entail, only a qualification that it must seek after the good. We see general congruence from both sources on the foundation of personal (and perhaps consequentially political) slavery. An imbalanced attachment to desire, spirit, or even reason itself is fatal for men or cities who wish to be truly free. In both accounts it is clear that reason must lead, but there is no firm consensus possible on where, exactly,

the firm boundaries of 'reason' finally rest. The issue between them is the same as it has ever been - when confronting Jerusalem and Athens, the agreement between Plato and Shakespeare on the thing that we may call morality, its importance for the city and man, as well as the general content and insufficiency of that morality in the final context is clear. They differ on the extent to which they will freely speculate on what it is that completes morality. Plato speaks often of God and gods, but does not appear willing to suggest the philosopher king be in any way subservient to any pre-existing 'wisdom' contained therein. Shakespeare goes the further step of showing the gods – reformed gods – but is never comfortable detaching his divine creations from the demands of reason. There is no Abrahamic test in Shakespeare, and no clear demand or need for one. There are supernatural events, but no God made flesh. This presupposition of synthesis, this undisciplined Christianity, leaves lots of room for debate and discussion between the two and their adherents. The devil, after all, is in the details.

Shakespeare clearly favours a structure that synthesizes human reason and philosophic wisdom with faith in God. Shakespeare's willingness to critique existing depictions of divine things – to refine them and better them under the light of rational philosophy suggests a hint of impiety. If Shakespeare's refinement of the Homeric Gods leads us to something that appears rather Christian, what exactly does this tell us? Does it not imply that the path to Christianity can be achieved through non-revelatory means? Shakespeare is willing to demonstrate the miraculous on stage. He is willing to show gods and spirits conversing with men, but he is not willing to show this miracle in a Christian or Jewish context. Shakespeare's unwillingness to depict Christ, however, tells us nothing about his true feelings on the matter. It is possible that Shakespeare thought it

impious or dangerous to do more than allude to Christ, but it is also possible his plays mean to demonstrate that the Platonic revision of the Homeric gods simply transformed faith inevitably towards Christianity.

Shakespeare, we must remember, is very comfortable in the world of seeming. Where Plato saw art as being three times removed from reality at best, Shakespeare counters by demonstrating the depth of seeming we find in art is simply a magnification of the ironies we find in real men.

DUNCAN: There's no art  
To find the mind's construction in the face:  
He was a gentleman on whom I built  
An absolute trust.

Enter MACBETH

This magnificent moment of irony stems from Duncan's full trust in the tyrant to be, Macbeth. He can know only Macbeth's seeming, and cannot see his being. We get all this from a stage direction. The ambiguity of the truth about men, and their ultimate motivation, is as vivid for Shakespeare's characters as it is for the man himself. The blindness with which Duncan dispenses this wisdom about the traitors in his midst tells us much about the weakness of men, but it tells us nothing about why Macbeth does what he does. Are Hecate and the witches the catalyst, the foundation of Macbeth's evil journey, or only their metaphorical expression? The play is spectacularly ambivalent on the matter – but we can approach the matter both on the grounds of speculative philosophy (Macbeth as Thrasymachus – he has reason to do what he does) or on the grounds of supernatural revelation (Macbeth is corrupted by the devil and a sinner who hides from the Truth).

We know only that Shakespeare felt it necessary to show us that Christian morality is in some way a synthesis of Platonic philosophy and obedient love of something larger than us all. And yet, at the same time, Shakespeare feels it important to spend time in his plays making an absolute adherence to blind faith (ie: Richard II) and critical philosophy (ie: Falstaff) appear equally absurd. Neither are presented, in isolation, as wholly viable options for the healthy souled city or man. We see the repercussions both for those men who do not have a fear of something higher (ie: Macbeth) as well as those who do not have ground themselves in a love of wisdom (ie: Timon). But he does not show us a Socrates, and he does not show us a Christ. The tension inherent in the vitality of the west, that between Jerusalem and Athens, is preserved in Shakespeare. And he does more than simply preserve – he heightens it.

In *Jerusalem and Athens* Strauss famously claims that no man can be both a philosopher and a theologian, but that it is very important they should choose to be one or the other. Where does this leave us with Shakespeare? Might we say that the good poet, as we have constructed him with Plato, could encompass a third category? The good poet, Shakespeare, is clearly irreducible to either philosophy or a particular theology, and in fact partakes regularly in both. He routinely synthesizes them, as other Christians have done, but without expressing a final sympathy for either – rather he situates them both as crucial aspect of the healthy city and man. While this may have the effect of making one think that the entire poetic project of Shakespeare has the effect of a kind of denial of orthodox faith, and is therefore philosophic in nature, might we not say that the outright mockery of the philosophers in favour of the ‘customary’, is in its own right an appeal to a return that can only be categorized as pastoral or faith based?

Neither are definite destinations, and this is the genius of the poetry itself. While Strauss means to show true synthesis is impossible through his analysis of Hermann Cohen, he does not address the possibility of a mode which rejects the quest for wisdom in and of itself as well as the life of unquestioning obedience to God as being necessarily best. Rather than begin from the first things, does Shakespeare not begin from the middle? From the human things? The poet does not synthesize because he escapes foundational claims – he has no interest in the first things. Shakespeare is an imitator, and at times a progenitor, but he does not claim to be the progenitor, or the source of all progeny. Shakespeare is open to religion, to Jerusalem, and may very well be a believer. But he does not tell us, hence we do not know. For Strauss, I should think, that is more than enough.

The imitating art, Strauss says, is distinguished from other arts because it has a kind of comprehensiveness.<sup>257</sup> The poet, for Plato, becomes responsible in the just city for the education of the young – and in this lays his greatest hope and his greatest fear. Shakespeare, it may be said, has this very sense of comprehensiveness which allows him to educate the young toward greatness in political life, love and art. Never does his work have the effect of praising injustice for its own sake – whatever the effect of Shakespeare's tyrant's successes, they are never shown to be truly happy or indefinitely prosperous in the way that Henry V's England or Prospero's new polis can potentially be. These are great men, in their own way, and Shakespeare asks us to imitate them. In the unjust city, in Shakespeare's time and our own, can we have asked for a more comprehensively just poet?

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<sup>257</sup> Strauss, Leo. (April 9, 1957) Lecture on Plato's Republic.  
<http://leostrausstranscripts.uchicago.edu/navigate/2/7/>

The possibility that poetry might represent a way of knowing in some way independent of reason and revelation is alluded to by Jaffa in his disagreement with Pangle. While Pangle sees the Bible, and therefore Jewish or Christian faith, merely as a subset of poetry that Plato wishes to make subservient to philosophy, Jaffa sees a problem. To him, the result of Socratic conversations that increasingly tend toward an awareness of that which we “do not know” does not appear, in the final analysis, to have a concrete foundation itself. “How can a Socratic know that his “progress” is in “wisdom” if the goal of philosophy recedes with every supposed advance? Does not philosophy – confidence in the ultimate significance of reason-depend upon an act of faith as much as a belief in the God of the Bible?”<sup>258</sup> In the end, there is a certain mystery to both reason and revelation that perhaps only poetry, a Shakespearean sort of poetry, can help us understand. This very human art of beginning from the middle allows us to situate, understand and mediate the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens in a thoroughly interesting and entertaining fashion.

We are left, therefore, with the impression from Jaffa that Shakespeare is Christian. What it means, however, to be a Christian is left very purposively unspecified in Shakespeare’s works. We know he is heavily inspired by the Platonic account of the healthy soul and the need for more just accounts of gods and the afterlife. Shakespeare does not leave a clear path to theological certainty or denominational purity, there does not appear to be any easy way to worship at the Church of Shakespeare – other than to partake in the activity of the plays themselves which are as rich and diverse as anything on the planet. In this light Shakespeare appears rather like Strauss’ Nietzsche, who,

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<sup>258</sup> Orr, Susan. (1995) *Jerusalem and Athens: Reason and Revelation in the Work of Leo Strauss*. New York, Roman and Littlefield. p 157

beholding the 1001 cultures, has a secret reverence for the Greeks and the Hebrews specifically. Shakespeare is but a beholder of the cultures he represents, from the Greeks and Romans to English, Italians, Moors, Danish and others; never mind the cultures he more or less creates.

The side effect for Strauss of anyone who beholds the value tables of other cultures is the fact that in seeing the contradictions apparent between them, he necessarily moves to a position of being ultimately subject to the commandments of none.<sup>259</sup> The problem intensifies in that a poet cannot appear to behold all other cultures effectively unless he or she was firmly rooted in a culture of his own. For Shakespeare, this is a firm rooting in English culture, in the West itself, but he performs the philosophic feat of beholding the foundation of his own culture and the direction in which it is headed, faith in tow. Shakespeare is rooted in a Platonic tradition, and he appears to quite knowingly equate that tradition with Christianity. He expresses profound interest in the founding principles of those civilizations that have now come to encompass the English experience, and also in the surface differences of contemporary cultures in his own era. In his jumps through time and inventions of history – what else could Shakespeare be up to but an attempt to investigate his own questions about a universal culture, about man as such? He does not take the step to create it as Nietzsche would have in his superman, but he does point towards it.

Unlike Spinoza or even Machiavelli, Shakespeare does not deny the possibility of miracles. He encourages them and is increasingly fascinated by them. Is he Machiavellian in his belief that great empires spring from a myth about the miraculous abilities of the founder, or is he very simply open to the possibility that God works

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<sup>259</sup> Strauss, Leo. (1997) *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*. New York Press. P.378

miracles in and through political life? Whether he ultimately believes in miracles is irrelevant, for he believes in the possibilities their stories hold for great men. Miracles are like markers in time for moments of greatness. The more miraculous the event, the more likely it is to be remembered, and in all likelihood, revered. It is its own irony then, and no small miracle itself that one man from Stratford named William Shakespeare came to create such a vision, perhaps at present *the vision*, for English speaking peoples. In time, we may see that vision alongside others – Jerusalem, Athens, Stratford.

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