

**Roundtable Remarks on
Leon Harold Craig's *The Philosopher's English King***

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"Maturity is the ability to tolerate ambiguity."

Professor Craig has written an unusually probing and imaginative analysis of Shakespeare's *Henriad*, exhibiting an exhaustive desire to understand and explain a political philosophy that he finds Shakespeare to be expressing in them. His background reading has been enormous. His intimate knowledge of Plato, Hobbes, and Machiavelli is on full display. His book is intelligent, provocative, and, at times, witty. Having read it twice, I'd like to begin by noting some of its peculiar strengths. Afterwards, I'll indicate where my views depart from Professor Craig's on some issues.

First: Professor Craig is remarkably adept at identifying puzzles, in particular perplexities within the plots of the plays. In his view, Shakespeare has "planted" these for those few who would be drawn by a serious desire to resolve them into what Craig calls authentic "philosophic activity."¹ Whether or not that is so, Craig asks excellent *questions* about curious phenomena, actions, relationships, and events. in the plays. Why in *Richard II* does the Welsh army suddenly disperse on the basis of false information? In *Henry IV Part One*, why doesn't York join his forces with those of the rebels at Shrewsbury? The answers he provides to these puzzles is always incisive and ingenious.

Second: Professor Craig's portrait of *Shakespeare's* portrait of the man who becomes Henry V is a strong and consistent reading, in which from first to last—from the Prince Hal we

¹ Leon Harold Craig, *The Philosopher's English King: Shakespeare's Henriad as Political Philosophy* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015), 28.

first see at the Boar's Head Tavern with Falstaff, to the Henry V who woos Princess Katherine of France—he is a brilliant, cold-hearted, calculating politician, who studies all types and classes of people and their languages, and studies his realm, and studies kingship, and even studies books, in order to gain and legitimize and keep his rule in a manner reflecting genuine knowledge of human hearts and minds. In the course of this account, Craig addresses, among other themes, Hal's ideas about *honor*; and by contrasting these with Hotspur's, in a vivid and convincing manner, he reveals much. Whether or not Shakespeare meant for his most gifted readers to see in Hal-become-Henry V an educative picture of political, philosophical, and even moral *wisdom*, as Professor Craig suggests, is another matter; but that depends partly on how prepared one is to view Shakespeare as *primarily* a philosophical pedagogue—a topic to which I'll return.

Third: Professor Craig brings into eminent clarity the question of political legitimacy, by explaining how the “legitimacy problem” is not only central to *Richard II* but a unifying theme of the whole tetralogy. Much could be written about Professor Craig's book's ongoing analysis of legitimate political representation in light of Voegelin's insights into the matter—but that would take me away from what I wish to do now, which is to express some of my disagreements with Professor Craig's interpretations. These pertain to Shakespeare's writings; art; human nature; love; and the cosmos. But I'll begin with Falstaff.

Professor Craig spends a good deal of time on Falstaff—as well he must, given Falstaff's prominence in the two *Henry IV* plays and in the story of Prince Hal's development. Craig concludes that Falstaff is to be despised, for moral and political reasons. He appears to be personally repulsed, and merely repulsed, by him. And he tells us that Shakespeare would wish that those few who can rise to a proper understanding of his political teaching to arrive at the same repugnance—and not to be taken in by Falstaff's amusing qualities to the degree of feeling

any affection for him, or concern about his (that is, Falstaff's) feelings. We should especially, writes Craig, feel no sympathy at all for Falstaff when there falls the inevitable, dramatic rejection of him by the newly crowned Henry in the theatrical *coup de grace* at the end of *Henry IV Part 2*. Craig admits that Falstaff can be "wonderfully funny," but explains that Shakespeare's aim is to teach those who truly seek wisdom, and can plumb the depths of moral truth, what Plato also taught: "that he who aspires to wisdom must train himself to think before he laughs."² For Craig, Falstaff is a test: if you find him attractive at all, you are not of the philosophical elect. And you don't know how to read Shakespeare as Shakespeare intended.

This account of how Falstaff's character should be understood and responded to, and his function in the plays, runs strongly against the large bulk of critical opinion (not to mention popular reaction). The large majority of critics have explained that we do, and ought to, feel a *mixture* of feelings about Falstaff—contradictory feelings, ambivalent feelings—both about Falstaff in his prime, and about his downfall at the moment of his ritualistic public rejection at the close of *Henry IV Part 2*. They argue that, while Shakespeare has created a plot that from the start points to the fact that Hal's rejection of Falstaff must finally happen, and that there is a *kind* of gratification in our experiencing justice being thus served—for who would wish Falstaff's carnivalesque and lawless spirit to still have sway over the new King?—we also understandably and properly sympathize with Falstaff's pain, and feel some repulsion at the new King's brutally cold-hearted humiliation of Falstaff's vain dreams and affection for Hal. In other words: the critical consensus is that we properly have *ambiguous* emotions with regard to both characters: Prince Hal/Henry V, and Falstaff, throughout the pair of plays in which the two appear. This view is only tenable, however, if our own characters as readers of Shakespeare are guided by,

² Craig, *The Philosopher's English King*, 125, 128.

first, a nuanced understanding of the varieties of love and love's importance in human affairs, and second, an ability to tolerate ambiguity. Love and ambiguity shall now be my themes.

I agree with the critic Tony Tanner that it would be sheer calumny against Shakespeare to think that he himself did not perceive and feel the "inhumanity" of Hal's treatment of Falstaff.³ Why is it inhuman? First, because Falstaff is more than a clown, a menace, and a disgrace, which is all that Professor Craig allows him to be; he is a character we are bound to love, for reasons *that transcend the moral and the political*—as Shakespeare well knew. And second, because the texts make it clear (to me if not to Professor Craig) that Falstaff's love of Hal, though embedded in wildness, is real; and that Mistress Quickly speaks truly when she states in *Henry V* that the new King has killed Falstaff through "killing his heart."

Why does one properly love Falstaff? Not because he is moral, dependable, lawful, or an embodiment of any of the virtues hallowed by moral philosophers. And certainly not because one would wish to know him in real life—as Harold Bloom writes, "personally he is bad news."⁴ One loves him because, first, he is the exuberance of life incarnate. He radiates infinite energy, an unqualified joy in pure being, an unparalleled passion to live—the Greek word would be *dynamis*. And since he is human, this unbounded vitality manifests itself both in sensual enjoyments and in the use of intelligence in the form of wit. I cannot agree with Professor Craig's extremely odd comment that Falstaff's "speeches" are "quite pedestrian."⁵ On the contrary: I agree with Harold Bloom, again, in stating that "Falstaff is Shakespeare's wit at its very limits"; that Falstaff and Hamlet are the two most intelligent characters in Shakespeare; that Falstaff has "absolute presence of mind"; that "Falstaff *is* mind," while Prince Hal is mere

³ Tony Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 407, 438.

⁴ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 284.

⁵ Craig, *The Philosopher's English King*, 124.

“policy.”⁶ What we love in Falstaff has nothing to do with morality, or political concerns. He symbolizes, as A. R. Humphries says, life itself: he *embodies* the “large comedy of humanity.”⁷ This phrase—“the large comedy of humanity”—suggests what is finally at stake in a properly nuanced view of both Falstaff and Shakespeare’s intentions for him.

The human drama is ultimately a mystery unfolding in the cosmos. It unfolds, as Voegelin would say, within the *metaxy* of human-divine meaning. Is it a tragic mystery? or a comedic mystery? The Christian perspective is that it is comedic—as in the *Commedia* of Dante. The Christian/comedic vision recognizes a dimension of meaning in which human beings participate that transcends our moral and political understanding, machinations, and solutions. There is, it holds, a supramoral and suprapolitical dimension of meaning to the drama in which we are players. This is the dimension of the happy miracles; of unresolvable paradoxes; of grace and the quality of mercy; of happiness and consolation without apparent cause; and of love that arises from, and responds to, the inexplicable fact of being and more being; life and more life; the blessing of creation and life in its unlimited, ungraspable, abundance.

Was Shakespeare cognizant of this dimension of reality in the cosmos? Of course he was; it saturates his plays. And Falstaff—who undoubtedly “got away” from Shakespeare during his creation, with whom Shakespeare himself fell in love and couldn’t keep himself from giving more and more lines and speeches in the two *Henry IV* plays, even as he separated Prince Hal, of dramatic necessity, more and more from his character and influence—incarnates, in his titanic vitality and supreme wit, this supramoral and suprapolitical dimension. That is why Allan Bloom states that Falstaff is a denizen of the lowlife tavern world where we first find him but “expresses [consciousness of his life there] with a spirituality that transcends it,” and that Hal does indeed

⁶ Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 271, 273, 296, 324 (emphasis added).

⁷ Quoted in Tanner, *Prefaces*, 413.

enjoy Falstaff, and even admires him, but “in a certain supramoral way.”⁸ W. H. Auden equates Falstaff with the suprapolitical and the mysteriously divine realm of being in which humans participate so far as to say that he is “a comic symbol for the supernatural order of Charity.”⁹ By Charity, of course, Auden means *agape*—love. Falstaff loves *being* more than us; God is being; God is love; Falstaff embodies the puzzle that someone who is a moral and political disaster can simultaneously be a revelation of divine energy manifested in human wit and exuberance.

Thus there is an easy answer, I believe, to the question Professor Craig puzzles over without being able to solve: why on earth does Hal choose to hang out with Falstaff, of all people? The answer is: how, having found him, could he *not* choose him? He is a life-force that is the very opposite of Hal’s sickening, grieving, calculative father, Henry IV; he is the supreme teacher of wit to Hal, as Shakespeare makes clear, and one who can, more importantly, enable Hal to develop his own intelligence by matching wits with him, which Hal needs for his special education; Hal sees in Falstaff, with regard to energy, drive, and intelligence, a “soul-mate,” as Allan Bloom states, and is attracted—as are we—both by “the potential for shared insight” and by the discovery of “such joys as are beyond the unerotic necessities of politics.”¹⁰

But while Hal is drawn to, delights in, and learns from, Falstaff, he does not love him. It is doubtful that Hal loves anybody. Nevertheless, Falstaff loves *him*. Professor Craig disagrees; he describes Falstaff as alien to any type of genuine friendship or love, and as having a merely mercenary attitude toward Hal. This is a view I find belied by Shakespeare’s texts again and again. Falstaff muses *to himself*, with regard to Hal: “I am bewitched by the rogue’s company. If the rascal have not given me medicines to make me love him, I’ll be hanged.” Hal is to Falstaff

⁸ Allan Bloom, *Love & Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 403, 404.

⁹ W. H. Auden, “The Prince’s Dog,” in Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1948), 198.

¹⁰ Bloom, *Love & Friendship*, 409.

his “lovely bully,” he is “the most comparative, rascalliest, sweet young prince.” As Northrop Frye writes, “[t]here is no mistaking the genuineness of the affection in that tone.”¹¹ Why does Falstaff love Hal? He is the son he never had; he is his soul-mate in the inventions of wit, and in energetic potency. And his love even deludes him, as love will, into the fantastical blind imagining that his lordship of misrule will have the same part in Hal’s life when he comes to the kingship as it did in the Boar’s Head Tavern. We feel Falstaff’s pain when the new king so publicly severs him from himself—although we know it has to happen, and we understand its justice. Still, Henry’s disowning of Falstaff reduces Henry’s humanity: it banishes from his horizon of concern not just “plump Jack,” but all the unresolvable complications of the human heart and human life that point beyond the politically manageable. As Frye points out, Falstaff is “a time-blocking figure”; and Hal’s time out of time, his time for educative play in the comedic world that stands apart from history just as do myth and religious truth, is over: he must enter history, become history.

I am arguing for the propriety, the sane openness, of ambiguous and contradictory emotions in response to the famous scene of Falstaff’s rejection. Professor Craig argues that those who love and have a genuine degree of wisdom will have no sympathy for Falstaff—that Henry’s severance with him is a fair proceeding and nothing else. His argument follows from his conviction that Shakespeare is essentially, in his words, a “philosopher-poet” who has “embedded” “political lessons” in the *Henriad*, that constitute a “philosophical teaching . . . for the sake of the few who might look to [Shakespeare] for wisdom.” Shakespeare, in his view, is *above all* using these plays to teach philosophical points.¹² And those points, he avers, not only conform to the philosophical teachings of Plato, Hobbes, and Machiavelli, but they are

¹¹ Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 76.

¹² Craig, *The Philosopher’s English King*, 58, 127, 128, 238.

throughout the plays internally coherent, nonparadoxically soluble, and unambiguous—which one would see if only one had enough insight to rise to the level of the Bard’s wisdom.

But this seems to me to overlook an elementary, glaring fact about Shakespeare: he was first of all a dramatic and poetic *artist*. And the role of an artist—fulfilled by no one more profoundly than Shakespeare—is *to explore possibilities*: possible ways of being, of living, of thinking, seeing, hearing, reflecting, choosing, doing. His principal obligation as a dramatist is to enter as fully as possible into the beings of his characters—he must fully imagine them, whether Iago or Juliet, Rosalind or Edmund, Falstaff or Hamlet. To do this he cannot be primarily engaged in shaping them for a didactic purpose. Even with regard to Iago, or Edmund, or Lady Macbeth, while creating them he must not compromise their being; he must delight in them, although he knows them to be morally reprehensible. He must plumb the depths of contradictions in the human heart, the irresolvable complexities of darkness and light; portray the infuriating moral impotence of Hamlet together with the infinite attractiveness of his sublime self-awareness and intelligence; reveal the lustful and vivacious wickedness of Edmund together with his capacity to genuinely repent when only moments away from death. Shakespeare, more than any artist, presents every form of human capacity for good and bad, and shows, as Keats pointed out, the utmost capacity for “negative capability”: that is, the ability of an artist to remain “in uncertainties, mysteries, [and] doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

There are all kinds of political, moral, and religious modes of practice or belief that inform the background or settings of in Shakespeare’s plays, or are represented or espoused by his characters, but considered closely they do not cohere—not within a play, and not within the *oeuvre*. That is because Shakespeare is essentially neither a philosopher by practice, nor a teacher by profession. *Plato* is indeed a philosopher-poet—though it is a dubious process to

extract a political agenda from Plato's *Dialogues*, since Plato understands that there is a dimension of human existence that involves participation in a divine mystery, a dimension he addressed in his great myths, which, contrary to some views, are not sops to entertain the untutored or unwise, but are rather symbolic evocations of the surmised but not conclusively knowable mystery of the cosmic drama, which is perhaps a cosmic comedy. Shakespeare, on the other hand, has no political teaching. Nor does he have a religious teaching. For example: is Richard II right to claim that sacred balm can never be washed from a consecrated head? Maybe; maybe not. Shakespeare does answer this for us. As Tony Tanner says, there can be no certainty in such matters, either for us, or with respect to our understanding of Shakespeare's views.¹³ Harold Bloom puts it succinctly: "One can *never* establish Shakespeare in a particular stance, whether political, religious, or philosophical."¹⁴ Just try to resolve the religious world of *Hamlet*.

Does this mean that there is nothing to learn politically from Shakespeare? Of course not. We can learn enormously, because Shakespeare explores questions of legality, legitimation, justice, the common good, the individual good within the community, social and political corruption, sources of political disorder and order, and moral life in general with an incisiveness unparalleled in the world of literary art and, except for the very highest realms of thought, of philosophy and theology. But pursuing a *cohesive teaching* about such matters in the plays will lead, practically speaking, into the type of wilderness of speculation that we witness among the devotees of the game of "Who wrote Shakespeare?" Abjuring such a temptation, we will learn endlessly from Shakespeare because his genius has absorbed and transmuted into the most illuminative dramatic complexities the insights of so many writers and ideas, and to them added

¹³ Tanner, *Prefaces*, 389.

¹⁴ Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 250 (emphasis added).

his unparalleled range of insight into human possibilities to create characters that teach us what it means to be human.

And among the ideas he has absorbed is *the Christian revelation of the absolute value of every person*. He has absorbed the vision of every person being—in the intrinsic dignity that belongs to humanness as such—of infinite worth. This doesn't mean that we know Shakespeare to have been a believing Christian—much less to have been Protestant or Catholic. (Theories abound, but they are unprovable.) It means that he can invest his characters with the dramatic value of being loved—mercifully and beyond knowable cause—by an infinitely loving God. Hamlet comes, at the end of his play and life, to trust in this; thus Shakespeare must have consciously apprehended its possibility. And the immoral and dangerous Falstaff, as the embodiment of the blessing of “more life,” and of the furthest reach of human wit, and as the lover of Hal, *challenges* the political with the paradox of an order of energy and love beyond merely moral categories. Falstaff, we find out in *Henry V*, dies for love—dies of a broken heart; dies for his love of Hal. Shakespeare cannot have given us, in so touching a manner, this dramatic picture of Falstaff's death—in a offstage scene that in the telling, incidentally, intentionally parallels the death scene of Socrates in the *Phaedo*—without loving Falstaff, both as his creation and as a symbol of the higher paradoxes of the human drama. This is why Harold Bloom says, rightly, that to reject Falstaff is to reject Shakespeare.¹⁵

The upshot is that, when we feel Falstaff's pain in the rejection scene in *Henry IV Part 2*, we feel divine pain—the wounding of God's own love for Falstaff. Also, to be sure, we feel a taste of the *absence* of the divine in Henry's rejection of him, since it is a cold rejection untempered by love—necessary, to be sure, in this political world, but not the final word on the matter of the infinite value of Falstaff's soul. Thus, when Professor Craig suggests that perhaps

¹⁵ Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 278.

Henry's theatrical and cruel rejection of Falstaff "is meant to test the depth of a person's love of truth"—meaning that we are not lovers of truth if we sympathize at all with Falstaff's pain—I would suggest, instead, that the moment of rejection may be used to test the depth of a person's awareness of the truth of love.¹⁶

¹⁶ Craig, *The Philosopher's English King*, 95.