

Whatever else is true of *Political Theologies*, Shuger's wide-ranging intellectual interests are persistently evident in it. The reader encounters useful information, references, and ideas in her discussions of Plato's *Laws*, Cicero's *De legibus*, and Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra*. One can learn something about St. Augustine's correspondence with Roman magistrates concerning the execution of justice, about the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and about the origins and development of the English equity courts and "cross-over" practices that made the common-law courts more merciful than the letter of the law would have led us to predict. This impressive range engages the reader even where the argument prompts resistance.

If Shuger's interpretative take on *Measure for Measure* were more often made explicit and more attentive to the subtle turns of thought and feeling the play's language evokes, I suspect it could be persuasive to many scholars of historicist inclination. Perhaps that explicitness will be forthcoming as Shuger extends her already productive scholarly career. In the meanwhile, it is useful to be reminded of many early viewers' belief that kings and other magistrates in some way actually embodied divine potency; that they were charged to execute divine justice in this world; and that that charge licensed them in their own and others' eyes to treat their subjects in ways that today appear intrusive, manipulative, self-indulgent, and even sadistic. This requires an effort of historical imagination that is fully worth making.

Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear. By LEON HAROLD CRAIG. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Pp. xii + 406. \$70.00 cloth.

Reviewed by JONATHAN BALDO

The publication of a book on Shakespeare by a scholar in another field should always be a welcome event, helping those of us within the field to see our subject with fresh eyes. A political scientist at the University of Alberta and the author of a previous study of Plato's *Republic*, Leon Harold Craig often has occasion to refer to Plato in his new study of political philosophy in Shakespeare.¹ Holding that "Shakespeare was an assiduous student of . . . Plato's texts and problems, . . . especially those having to do with the relation between philosophy and political power" (251), Craig argues that the ancient Greek philosopher and Elizabethan playwright shared a method. "Shakespeare was not only cognizant of the larger philosophical questions that his political stories raise, but . . . he crafted his dramas with the intention of showing how those questions arise out of, and bear upon, his stories. Thus the reader of Shakespeare's plays, as of Plato's dialogues, experiences philosophy arising 'naturally,' that is, out of the diligent pursuit of answers to the problems and questions and perplexities implicit in ordinary political life" (193).

Only one other political philosopher plays an important role in Craig's book: Machiavelli, who figures prominently in Craig's chapter on *Macbeth*, "Shakespeare's most

¹ See Leon Harold Craig, *The War Lover* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994).

philosophically ambitious play" (29) and one "designed to illustrate the political teachings we associate most readily with Machiavelli's *The Prince*" (31). When exploring "the political problems that arise because of . . . rulers' being insufficiently reflective" (194), Craig makes Plato his primary point of reference. The range of political thought discussed in the course of the book only seems narrow, since Craig's aim is to show that Shakespeare, far from merely digesting the political thought of others to serve as backdrop to his plays, was a major political thinker in his own right.

Quite aware of how "old-fashioned" (11) his book will appear, Craig has no qualms about arguing for Shakespeare's greatness, though he locates that greatness in an unexpected source: "Shakespeare is as great a philosopher as he is a poet . . . , indeed, his greatness as a poet derives even more from his power as a thinker than from his genius for linguistic expression" (4). In two long, closely argued chapters on *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, he proceeds to lend credence to his thesis by unpacking the political thought that informs these two tragedies. He reads the plays with an alert and sympathetic eye and writes about them in an engaging prose. He builds his readings on the premise that there are "universal truths of human psychology, and that they are manifested in virtually all social milieux" (8).

As statements such as these would lead one to expect, Craig delivers no sense that the works he analyzes are Jacobean tragedies—that is, he makes no reference to King James or to contemporary political issues or events that were tightly bound to the political thought of his day. Remarking on the degree to which *Macbeth* and *King Lear* share "language and incidental details" (22), Craig refuses to pursue historical explanations for these parallels. Such explanations can uncover "nothing more than an accidental closeness in the circumstances in which both were composed" (23–24). Given the habitually strained relations between philosophy and history, it should come as no surprise that Craig's approach, which seeks to rescue the idea of "Shakespeare as a suitable teacher about matters of permanent importance" (6), should deliberately turn its back on historical issues.

The introductory chapter is fairly brimming with polemics. Too many of his barbs, however, land wide of their targets because the discussion is not informed by contemporary scholarly debate. For instance, one brief polemic is addressed to stage-centered critics who have produced "unreasonable restraints on what sorts of interpretive sallies are acceptable" (8). Craig, however, overlooks powerful allies such as Harry Berger Jr., who has written with theoretical subtlety and force on the topic of text versus performance.² And certainly a book concerned with political power in Shakespeare ignores at its own peril the rich literature on the subject to be found in critics such as Stephen Greenblatt, Stephen Orgel, Jonathan Goldberg, David Scott Kastan, Leonard Tennenhouse, Steven Mullaney, Leah Marcus, Jean E. Howard, Christopher Pye, and many others.

Presumably all of these critics fall into a category that Craig, in rather broad brushstrokes, characterizes as "postmodern." Such criticism, according to the author, "tends to

² See, for example, Harry Berger Jr., *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989).

be overtly historicist and ideological, and aimed more at exposé than sympathetic understanding" (286n). To be sure, the dominant trend in contemporary Shakespeare criticism and historicist literary studies generally entails learning to recognize and respect the "otherness" of the culture in which the work was produced rather than a search for universals. But Craig does not acknowledge that learning to read the works of the past with an eye to their *difference* may have an ethical dimension. Conversely, reading those works to confirm a set of values presumed to be universal may turn the history of literature into a hall of mirrors, in which we seek (and find) nothing but our own reflections and confirm nothing but the dominant cultural assumptions of our day. Each kind of reading, in other words, bears its own set of risks, related to either exaggerating or understating cultural and historical differences.

For philosophy even to be possible, Craig maintains, the world it investigates must "be both *coherent* (everything somehow fitting together, such that it constitutes one world, a uni-verse) and *consistent*" (174), a single reality underlying the multitude of divergent perspectives and interpretations. Hence, among Craig's untimely interpretive premises is this one: "each play's making perfect sense" depends "on its having neither loose ends nor inconsequential details" (7). Craig does not reference the new-historicist rhetoric of localism, but he is surely not unaware of recent attempts to reconstruct a local Shakespeare when he characterizes his own project as attempting to show that Shakespeare possessed "great *wisdom*" (4). His book will appeal to those exhausted by or impatient with the "more open and provisional stance[s]" fostered by much literary criticism.³

Craig aims to interest "a readership beyond that of specialists" (7). Unfortunately, the book's polemical first chapter threatens to lose the general or nonspecialist reader while wasting its argumentative energies on what strikes me as a misunderstanding of our own intellectual landscape. Contemporary thinking, Craig maintains, is characterized by widespread infatuation with "relativism," regrettably a "touchstone of intellectual sophistication" in our present age. Current dogma holds that "there neither is nor can be any genuine *knowledge*" about "what is right, noble, good, beautiful, and decent," since conclusions about such matters "necessarily entail 'value judgments' which are incorrigibly subjective" (4). It would take too long to rehearse all of the critical methodologies that, from the 1960s onward, have impinged on literary studies—from structuralism and semiotics to deconstruction, new historicism, and cultural materialism—and that would displace or restrict such claims. Craig's complaints against "relativism" would seem more aptly directed toward the intellectual climate of the first half of the twentieth century, not the second. It is not just the approach he takes but the very battles he is fighting, in other words, that run the risk of seeming dated. *Of Philosophers and Kings* keeps aloof from current critical scholarship on Shakespeare and the forms of political power. To the book's partisans, that disengagement will no doubt seem a virtue.

³ Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), 36.