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. So it goes. We know that the end of the night saw Socrates drinking generously 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. Only down this road can we understand the true nature of man. We hear very little more on the matter from Socrates, Aristophanes, Agathon, Plato, or any scholar since.

As we grapple with the long and divergent tracks of Shakespeare’s philosophic interests, all roads of true understanding inevitably lead back to Plato. Let us begin by asking the question directly – 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’. 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 I have aimed to do here and elsewhere is begin to take some foundational steps towards 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. What the Strauss-inspired authors have managed to do is make the case for a renewed enthusiasm for deep investigation into Shakespearean texts in a philosophic way; where most have failed is in insisting on doing so on the basis of a purely naïve or original reading. The Straussian position hinges on a desire to reorient the modern ‘academic Shakespeare’ into an ally of classical political philosophy and the desire to educate the young in the study of the liberal arts. In doing so, however, Shakespeare ends up becoming exactly like Plato.
What I have sought to show here is that while Shakespeare is best understood philosophically through the method of close reading, we should not ignore other like-minded methodologies that exist, nor should we overlook the extent to which Shakespeare often speaks about political subjects in a way that cannot be accounted for in a single text. Shakespeare can be reoriented towards supporting arguments about healthy political cities and human beings without entirely discarding 400 years of academic treatment. Scholars can, after all, be selective. In this selective vein, we should strive to pay less attention to those critics who emphasize individual plays or even individual speakers as the complete answer to Shakespeare’s view on any given topic. As T.S. Eliot noted, this is a great error in scholarship, as we should also pay attention to Shakespeare’s ability to peer through the dramatic actions of individual characters into a spiritual action that transcends them. Where elsewhere I have tried to demonstrate how a very close reading of a single text of Shakespeare can lead us directly to philosophic motivation in Plato, I have also showed how expanding that horizon to many or multiple texts can help to uncover a political meaning that may be impossible to uncover through the analysis of one work alone. What I endeavour to do here is bridge that gap by providing some context to recent Straussian investigations of Shakespeare with an emphasis on better understanding how Shakespeare’s ‘Platonic motivation’ can be understood in light of Socrates’ request for a synthesis of comedy and tragedy.

Although I ultimately see the true road to ‘understanding’ in these philosophic matters leading back to Plato, an honest journey through Shakespeare’s genius also must include the innumerable volumes of commentary, interpretation, historical investigations, philosophical diatribes, and criticism literature that constitute what is commonly referred to as his ‘academic treatment’. These too are important. Although I cannot constitute a full discussion 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. 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’ towards something that more closely resembles how Strauss analysed 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, a book by Bacon and Hawthorne called *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* suggested something similar. Bacon and Hawthorne make the argument Shakespeare had to conceal his views about political life because it was not acceptable to fully represent them on stage. This argument goes a long way towards supporting the intricate richness of Shakespearean metaphor as well as the different experiences one encounters in watching a Shakespeare play performed as opposed to carefully reading its text. While the experience of viewing a play more vividly evokes the emotion and passions of Shakespeare’s work, only an in-depth textual analysis can uncover the subtleties of his philosophic sympathies. The book suggests a consistent philosophy persists, ‘underlying the superficial’ text of the plays that no professor could have ‘ventured to openly teach in the days of Elizabeth and James’. That philosophy, Bacon and Hawthorne suggest, held the potential for a novel and rather wide-reaching power of universal enlightenment. The secrets of that philosophy,
once they unveiled them, would be 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”’. 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 resolving 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 Bacon. While we have plenty of evidence to argue for the very real political consequences of publishing anything critical of Elizabethan government, I argue we should depart 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 believe Shakespeare had done. This work, 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. The ancient quarrel is possible because of a fundamental agreement about the make-up of the human soul, and it continues to rage over what activity or quality best completes it. Neither Shakespeare nor Plato sought to eliminate this tension completely, and we have no evidence either believed they had solved the problems of political life. What we do know is that they both rather brilliantly illuminated the issues of political life in a way that still has a sharply magnetic power on the minds of the young.

We must note, at this point, that Francis Bacon’s friend Thomas Hobbes was amongst the first to believe he had done away with the problematic tension between philosophy, poetry, and politics. In Leviathan, although his doctrine is wholly different from ancient political philosophy, Hobbes sometimes worries that his philosophic labour will be ‘as useless as the commonwealth of Plato’. When he considers the problem again, however, he sees that the ‘science of natural justice’ is all that is 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 would 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 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’.

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’. 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 new-found possibility to be 'relinquished of the artists'.\textsuperscript{11} It is unthinkable for this author that the same Shakespeare who understands the science of modern philosophy to culminate in an irrelevance of poetry is himself a secret adherent of an approach that could render useless his own profession. Whereas Plato allows in the \textit{Republic} 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 \textit{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'.\textsuperscript{12} 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.

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 needs 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 \textit{Julius Caesar}, \textit{Othello}, and \textit{Merchant of Venice}.

Bloom ties the plays to issues in political philosophy by showing how the cities themselves are important constitutive elements of the characters and themes he presents. Bloom draws out the relationships between the characters in \textit{Merchant of Venice} as though he personally knows them, which depends equally upon a close reading of the text and an openness to interpret Shakespearean characters as possessing internally profound religious views:

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.¹³

In this way, Bloom moves from the particular conflict of Antonio and Shylock to the general conflict of religion and values per se. Bloom treats them as opposed based on the difference between the letter and the spirit of the law, meaning Shakespeare presents not only a vivid conflict taking place in a particular historical context but also one that partakes of 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 underlie 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 question 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 those we can explicitly account for 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 Jan Blits’ thoughtful work which looks to interpret *Julius Caesar* through a political discussion of manliness, friendship, Caesarism, the ethics of intention, and the dichotomy between republican and autocratic government.¹⁴ The considerable merits of both Bloom and Blits’ work are tempered, 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 ‘naïve’ reading of the plays; 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 they do 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 wilfully ignored a vast amount of existing Shakespearean criticism seems in this specific sense justified.¹⁵ We must read Shakespeare closely – in fact, very closely – but we should welcome the overwhelming majority of traditional academic contributions to Shakespeare as an aid to our own philosophic understanding.

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.¹⁶ 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’. 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. He claims, for example, that the true concern of Socrates in relation to poetry is that it will depict an untold number of ‘ugly truths about human nature’. In this reading, Socrates was not really concerned that Homer and Hesiod’s poetry was false but that it was too true to reveal to society at large. In this way, Craig seems to be part of 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 terrible depths of human nature in terrifically gory detail on stage and in text for the entire world to see. Craig argues that it is necessary 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’s 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 the former the simple handmaiden of the latter. 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 often 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. What links the poets and Plato lies under the surface of the Republic and is not spoken, 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. 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:

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? Such hesitation about Shakespeare's 'unwavering support' of philosophy is central to my work. In my view, 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 in Athens, 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. This is Shakespeare's power of poetics that Socrates did not truly possess.

The dark terror of Macbeth's soul is not calculated or reasoned 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 Craig's 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 discards his magic staff into the sea would still prevail over a killer like Macbeth? The liberal arts are strong but not that strong. While there is no denying Shakespeare has moments that demonstrate the sheer power of a command of human philosophy, isn't he like 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 that I believe they differ. It is entirely possible, and I think probable, that Shakespeare shared the same understanding.
of the healthy political soul as Plato, without believing philosophy in and of itself is
the highest form of life. 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.24

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 neither illuminated
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, all communication
necessarily begins with rational understanding, but because poetic imagination, properly
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?25

The suggestion by Socrates that concludes the Symposium is unique in that it does not
allude to an answer provided elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, nor, as I argue, does it
receive its due until the arrival of Shakespeare. Only he can fuse the comic and tragic
components of the human soul in such a way as to make a case for the re-emergence of
the poets into the city of the Republic, and it is plain to see that none have had an impact
greater than Shakespeare’s on the western World’s understanding of itself. The idea,
then, that men may receive understanding and laughter at the same time is a common
goal of both Shakespeare and Plato. Strauss understands The Republic to have both tragic
and comic consequences inherent in its travel ‘down’ to the Piraeus. So long as the
discussion in Plato’s dialogue occurs within the boundaries of the utopian ‘city in speech’,
the more outlandish statements Socrates makes about absolute equality have a pleasing
comic effect. The closer we come to the realities of political and social life, however, the closer we come to tragedy. The implementation of the Socratic ideas that appear to be comic may in fact be necessary for establishment of absolute equality. Such implementation is, inevitably, tragic in the political sphere. Shakespeare requires both the comic and the tragic in order to show us this naked truth.

Lest we commit, however, the same mistakes as the most famous Straussian interpreters, by insisting on a Shakespeare who looks and sounds remarkably the same as their Socrates, I argue another excellent avenue to ‘finding’ Plato in Shakespeare is that of other great thinkers. One such is T.S. Eliot. 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. 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’ to our conduct that may 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.

Eliot is famous for having outlined what he called the ‘Senecan attitude’ in many of Shakespeare’s plays. He says, 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, Eliot 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, crawling out of the woodwork. 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 audience 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 how Shakespeare’s characters utilize a ‘doubleness of speech’, we arrive at a position where Shakespeare has rather cleverly assigned the audience of his plays a role very similar to that Socrates does in Plato’s dialogues. For Socrates, doubleness of speech was his ability to speak differently to different kinds of people, with a second layer of meaning underlying his words. Some would understand this layered irony that often accompanied his speech, while others would not. Because Shakespeare exposes a ‘universal human weakness’ that is only revealed through an awareness of Othello’s doubleness of speech, we as the audience are compelled to 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

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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 of them on the essential questions of man.29 Eliot himself was opposed to 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 Catholic theology from Dante, because the poet himself points towards Aquinas.30 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 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 that he is the starting point and foundation.

As far as the Republic goes, the common view that Plato wishes to censor all genuine poetics and create dogmatic boors does not consider the context in which Socrates is purposely crafting the impossible city, nor does it fully account for the fact that Socrates himself appears to be telling rather tall tales. The common view disregards the fact that the ‘ring of Gyges’ discussion in the Republic reads rather remarkably like the outline of a play. Glaucón gives a vividly detailed characterization of the main players and even dramatizes scenes regarding the invisibility process. Glaucón 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). Glaucón’s tale has all the elements of high tragedy. In fact, the synopsis Glaucón 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.

Sticking with Hamlet, Socrates also suggests in the Republic that the highest possible imitation of things 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 close as possible to what they are without actually being those things (Republic, 596e). The best possible 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 point to the deeds of actual political men and women as somehow being higher. Invoking Socrates and the *Republic* directly, Hamlet claims (III.ii) 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’.31

Othello too mirrors a Glaucon-like plot in so far as a woman of perfect virtue acquires a reputation for dishonour 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. Interiority, or monologue, becomes the most crucial part of art. Before Socrates has 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 poetic structure, yet to exist in his time and that 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’. Delight, after all, draws the audience in – similar to the way ridicule does in a comedy. Delight is essential for the production of philosophic understanding. 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 likely 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 and the guidelines Socrates suggests are 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 obvious examples. The explorations of the human soul that occur parallel to these plot devices are what make Shakespeare such a genius, bringing to theatrical delight the Platonic drama of the soul.
If we are to meaningfully connect Shakespeare and Plato for the modern world, I believe we should work towards answering Allan Bloom’s rhetorical question from the *Closing of the American Mind*: what does Shakespeare have to do with solving our problems? While I can’t do so fully here, I want to emphasize 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-mindedly as we would Plato. The method of close reading can and must pass both common-sense and methodological tests. There is no reason a fruitful engagement with Shakespeare cannot include both naïve and thoroughly researched components. The method of close reading, in contradistinction to the claims of most Straussians, can, in fact, be enriched by engaging with existing literary and critical interpretations to ‘turn around’ the conversation towards 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 Apeomantus in our philosophic presentation of Shakespeare, but to persuade the young as successfully as Socrates takes considerable skill. The modern 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. The discussion of these particularities, and the valuation of their ultimate place in the grand scheme of the world, is what constitutes 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, whereas 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 why. We know, like Plato, that he believes 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 can themselves be grounded in
the philosophy of Plato to the mutual benefit of both. Plato allows us to speak, even minimally, about Shakespeare’s philosophy. T.S. 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 my 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. Tragedy exists throughout political life and in the lives of human beings everywhere, but there is always some faculty of human affairs, some misaligned element of the human soul, that is to blame. Such misalignments are worthy of ridicule and shared investigation by society, for we need not succumb to a tragic view of all things. This is both in line with what Socrates requests in the Symposium and, more importantly, a significant statement that tends towards 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?’ These are questions I believe we should take seriously, 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 different answers to these questions, albeit answers that stop short of sweeping universal statements. The unity of comedy and tragedy, it would seem, does not lead us to the kind of philosophy that makes these sorts of sweeping universal statements. It prefers to stick to the conduct of men and women, to the city, and to the soul.

Related topics

See Chapters 1, 16, 17, 35

Notes

1 Jaffa (2003).
3 For context on my other works please see Kaytor (2012, 2015).
4 In addition to those I have cited in this paper, see also Tovey (1983, 1996); Alvis (1990); Parker (2004); Rowe (2010); Cantor (2004). The most important contributor to begin with in terms of directly linking Shakespeare with Plato is Platt (1979), who demonstrated the direct textual linkages between Socrates and Falstaff’s death scenes.
5 Bacon and Hawthorne (1857).
7 Bacon and Hawthorne (1857: 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.
10 Consider that Francis Bacon, Hobbes’ mentor, proponent of modernity, and contemporary of Shakespeare, used this expression as well (Bacon (1854: 184)).
12 Bloom (1964: 1).
14 Blits (1982).
15 Burckhardt (1960).
16 Craig (2001: 11).
17 Craig (2001: 251).
19 This argument hinges on whether or not Plato was attempting to esoterically promote the ‘way of Thrasy-machus as the author’s true intent. The equation of Thrasy-machus and Nietzsche, as well as a more fulsome discussion of the Straussian divide on these issues, can be found in Lampert (1996, 2013).
20 See, for example, Midsummer Night’s Dream: V.I.
23 Craig (2001); Mathie (2003).
31 Shakespeare would have had direct access to these dialogues through the Latin editions of Ficino (1484) and Serranus (1578) and may have felt compelled, as Rowe argues, to compete with Ben Jonson’s intellectualism. Jonson himself owned the Serranus edition. See also Rowe (2010).
33 In this sense, the article is in alignment with the thinking of the Straussian interpretations of Shakespeare. The rational (nous) element of the soul should lead, supported by a healthy dichotomy between spirited (thumos) and appetitive (epithumia) components. Shakespeare’s best political leaders (consider Henry V and Prospero) are good examples of the healthy political soul in this regard. Macbeth and Falstaff are excellent examples of political men whose spirit and appetite respectively take over with tragic consequences.
34 Although I cannot fully flesh here out the relationship between comedy and tragedy as Strauss sees it, I hope this work introduces the question of the mastery of comedy and tragedy in the Shakespearean corpus as one worth investigating. While the full understanding of Shakespeare’s understanding would necessarily require a view of the whole of his work, a comment may be helpful. Shakespeare demonstrates an ability to present vivid portraits of tragic political communities like Sophocles but never submits to a simply tragic view about the nature of the universe or man as such. There is almost always some comically absurd sense in which the characters have contributed to their own downfall, and they are never simply fated as such from the outset. In almost all cases, the tragic characters are worthy of ridicule. Shakespeare, like Aristophanes, does not appear to suggest the proper correction to an improperly balanced political soul requires a Socratic political philosopher. Falstaff and Apemantus (two comic Socratic characters) do not make their cities better – in fact, they do quite the opposite despite the best of intentions. The secret, for Shakespeare, is in demonstrating the accuracy of the Socratic account of the healthy political soul, while showing those teachings can only be implemented by figures who understand how to live and rule in modern political communities. They must master a new kind of political philosophy. Failure to implement these teachings in a political manner leads to tragedy. Consider that the comic presentation of Socrates in
the *Clouds* is necessarily ridiculous but not necessarily untruthful. Socrates appears rather like a clown to
the average member of the polis, and the great tragedy of politics shared by both Plato and Shakespeare
is that the clowns are right about the city and the soul of men, but they will never be listened to. For more
on comedy and tragedy see Strauss (1966).


**Further reading**

introduction to political philosophy, properly understood. Moving past the idea that the term refers simply
to the thoughtful study of politics, this essay demonstrates how we must situate ourselves as academics, in
one way or another, within an understanding of the good life.

as a young undergraduate, and I hope it might do the same for you wherever you are in your life. The idea
that not all forms of modern education might actually be serving the best interests of students or education
as such is rather a revelation. The book is largely polemical – and accepting it for what it is, and what it is
not, will be helpful.

essential guide to understanding the intersection between Shakespeare and political philosophy. Here
Bloom begins the argument for reading Shakespeare differently than is common in most schools, and
Jaffa’s take on *King Lear* turns the play on its head.

17–45. This is a more difficult Straussian text, which helps situate the conflict between reason and
revelation. The idea of progress is challenged in this text, and, for the careful reader, so too is the
possibility of return. In the conflict, however, there can be a kind of dynamic vibrancy Strauss argues is
healthy for society. Refer to George Grant for a more complete picture of how these ideas relate to
Christianity rather than Judaism.

anywhere else, is it made clear that the consideration of single speeches, characters, or even plays in
the consideration of Shakespeare’s ultimate intention is academic ground ripe for folly. Shakespearean
academic literature still has much work to do in order to connect the pieces across the oeuvre. This book is
also extremely entertaining.

**References**


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