

A Shakespeare Dialogue
ACTING ON
THE STAGE OF
HISTORY



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Will Shakespeare's Mission Be Ours

by Stanley Ezrol

*Rumor is a pipe
Blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures
And of so easy and so plain a stop
That the blunt monster with uncounted heads,
The still-discordant wavering multitude,
Can play upon it.*

— Spoken by Rumour,
Prologue to "Henry IV, Part 2"

We, are now confronted with completing the great task which was the mission of our beloved Will Shakespeare.

Four centuries of gossips have claimed, variously, that our Will either never existed;

Or, that he did exist, but was a barely educated clerk, a prop boy, a petty actor, a merchant, or almost anything,

but what he was, and that the plays and sonnets, which have inspired four centuries of English speakers, Germans, and all humans not renegade against their kind and their Creator, were actually produced by some or another fawning courtier;

Or, that he did write what he wrote, but that he himself was an ambitious bum-sucker, whose every word was designed to serve, flatter, or manipulate some potential patron at court.

Against this four centuries of gossip (often called "scholarship") we have our knowledge of our Will, but no

Southwark and the Globe Playhouse, London, 1647 (labels of Bear-Baiting and Globe arenas are inadvertently reversed); Shakespeare statue by John Quincy Adams Ward, Central Park, New York City, 1972.

evidence: No documents, no letters beyond the most perfunctory legalisms written by our Will. Not a single manuscript penned by Will's hand (with one possible exception: several pages of a play, *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, apparently written in haste by a group of playwrights). No contemporary report of any but the most routine details of Will's life.

Thus, this heap of surmises, jealousies, and conjectures has been used to justify the right claimed by four centuries of editors, producers, and directors, to rearrange, cut, paste, and mangle Shakespeare's work at will, for their own purposes of the moment. Kenneth Branagh, a recent leading figure in commercial Shakespeare film production, for example, explained to me at a 1991 dinner where he was presented with the "William Shakespeare Award for Classical Theatre," that he had mangled Shakespeare's *Henry V*, to produce a movie that Desert Storm supporters would use as propaganda in their cause, because "the play [Shakespeare wrote] simply didn't fall into the scheme for it that I had in relation to how one might regard a classic movie structure." After all, he might have thought, scholars have proven that Shakespeare really had no purpose in writing it the way he did anyway.

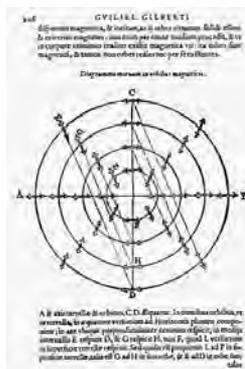
Our Will's Mission

And yet, we know our Will. How? As he said, "The play's the thing." We have what the gossips overlook, or twist beyond recognition, that without which none of these gossips would profit from their repeated murder of our Will: the plays, the sonnets, and the poems. We also have a fair idea of the massive historical crisis during which Will worked. We know something of his contemporaries, friends and associates, and, in part, what they did, what they wrote, and the wars, overt and covert in which they fought.

Will's publicly known theatrical career began in about 1592 and was, effectively, over by 1613. In that year, dur-



Shakespeare's circle included the playwrights and poets Christopher Marlowe (above, left) and George Chapman (above, right), and scientists such as William Gilbert (below, right). Gilbert's experimental 'On the Magnet,' shown below, lauded technological development, while advancing a hypothesis that influenced Kepler's theory of the planetary motions.



ing a performance of *Henry VIII*, the Globe Theater, in which Shakespeare was a partner, burned to the ground, much to the delight of one Henry Wotton, a peculiarly connected witness to the blaze, who promptly wrote his nephew "to entertain" him with the story. At that time, Shakespeare completed his retirement from the London scene and returned to his home in Stratford-on-Avon, where he died, at age fifty-one, in 1616.

In this period, Will's England was engaged in a conflict over the soul of Europe. The naive or malicious gossips portray this as a conflict between "Catholic" forces, led largely by the Spanish Inquisition, opposing the "Protestants," including the Church of England, the Lutherans, the Calvinists, the Huguenots, and the rebels of The Netherlands.

The actually significant battle-lines, however, were not Catholic versus Protestant, any more than today's battle is one between "Judeo-Christian" and Muslim. What Shakespeare and his collaborators were involved in was a battle to continue the work of the Fifteenth-century Renaissance, that is, to organize the world into a system of Commonwealths—nations on the model of Louis XI's

France, dedicated to the common good of all of their people, on all of their territory, for all time.

As we know from Shakespeare's work, religious intolerance, sectarian discord, war for the purpose of aggrandizing any individual, group, or nation, and any belief in invidious distinctions of race, class, or nationality, are for our Will, objects to be held in absolute contempt and treated with the harshest, but most loving, ridicule. Shakespeare was part of a circle, which we can identify by their work. We have only limited evidence of the nature and scope of their direct collaboration, but there is no doubt as to what they were attempting to accomplish together. This circle included the playwrights and poets Christopher Marlowe and George Chapman; the scientists William Gilbert and Thomas Harriott; and the Admiral, military innovator, entrepreneur, adventurer, and patron of the arts and sciences, Sir Walter Raleigh.

They were out to revitalize the study of Greek in England, as it had been revived earlier in Italy, France, and elsewhere in Europe; and to advance Renaissance science for the increase of man's power over nature.

Gilbert and Harriott, for instance, corresponded with the great astronomer, Johannes Kepler. These three were scientists in the tradition of Plato and the Renaissance genius, Nicolaus of Cusa, whose work they often invoked.

Harriott, though little known today, was both celebrated and viciously slandered at that time. His primary employment was as Raleigh's astronomer, navigator, linguist, and ballistics expert, as well as business manager, and all-around scientific and economic adviser. But, he was enough of a poet and student of Greek, to merit Chapman's dedicatory poem, in recognition of his assistance in the famous translation of Homer's *Iliad*.

Harriott's *Brief and True Report on the New Found Land of Virginia* was a best-selling account of the 1585



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Sir Walter Raleigh (above), a political leader of the Shakespeare circle, sponsored exploration of the New World, assisted by the scientist Thomas Harriott (right). Harriott recorded the potential for economic development in cooperation with the local inhabitants, in his "Brief and True Report on the New Found Land of Virginia" (below, right). Above: Elizabethan expedition to the New World. Below: Map from Harriott's "Report."



expedition, backed by Raleigh, which he had co-captained. It catalogues the prospects for agriculture and manufacturing in the New World, in cooperation with the local inhabitants, whose language, religion, and way of life he described; the which perspective he contrasted to the Spanish-style looting of gold, silver, and other resources, and the treatment of "Indians" as sub-human.

Raleigh and Harriott were also instrumental in developing the modern naval warfare technologies and strategies, which destroyed the power of the Spanish Armada.

But, there was opposition to this influence. The primary charge in the Privy Council investigation of Christopher Marlowe, during which he was murdered, was that he was promoting the "School of Atheism," led by Raleigh and Harriott.

Their opponent was the revived feudal order. Then, as

with the neo-conservative Empire fanatics we face today, feudalism depended on a state of perpetual warfare, perpetual military mobilization of the population against itself, and perpetual ignorance of the possibilities of scientific achievement. Its methods, like those of our own last “Century of Catastrophe,” and like those portrayed by Shakespeare, included bloody acts of terror, assassination, coup, and betrayal.

Gilbert, Harriott, Kepler, and their allies were in direct combat with the Venetian anti-science school of Paolo Sarpi, his household lackey Galileo Galilei, and their English propagandist, the corrupt pederast, Francis Bacon. Bacon, in his “great” work *Novum Organum*, attacked Gilbert directly for his experimental work on magnetism, as part of the “dangerous,” “theatrical,” and “poetical” school of science, which he associated with Plato and the Pythagoreans. Beyond Bacon, Sarpi’s influence in England was exercised through a circle of notables, with the leading amongst them being the same Henry Wotton, England’s first Ambassador to Venice, who was so delighted at the destruction of the Globe, and of Shakespeare’s career.

The Promise of Navarre

Shakespeare’s public career coincided almost precisely with the reign of Europe’s leading figure of religious reconciliation: Henry of Navarre, who reigned from 1589 until his death at the hands of a Jesuit assassin, in 1610. Although Navarre, the leader of the French Huguenots, had been the ostensible leading target of the Spanish-allied Guise family’s 1572 St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of his wedding guests, two decades later he ended the French wars of religion by accepting Catholicism himself, and promoting religious toleration in France.

Navarre’s efforts had gained the support of all forces of goodwill in Europe, including that of Shakespeare’s circle in England. Raleigh’s early military experience, for instance, was in France, fighting for Navarre under the Admiral Coligny who was murdered by the Guise on St. Bartholomew’s Day.

Marlowe’s last play, *The Massacre at Paris*, was produced at the time of Navarre’s conversion, to tell the story of the period from the 1572 Massacre, through the “War of the Three Henries” out of which Navarre emerged as

King. Although Henry III had joined with Henry Guise’s St. Bartholomew’s Day plot, he later tried to reconcile with Navarre, whereupon the Inquisition “Catholic” Guise went to war against the Catholic Henry, to force him to oppose the Huguenot Navarre. In 1588, Henry III killed the Duke of Guise, and then, after being mortally wounded by a Dominican friar, bound his nobility by an oath to support Navarre’s succession to the throne. Navarre returned this act of reconciliation by accepting the Catholic faith himself in 1593, which was the occasion for Marlowe’s production.

Within weeks, Marlowe was murdered by a team from Francis Walsingham’s secret service, which included those who had promoted the 1586 “Babington Plot,” which prevented any reconciliation between the Catholic Mary Stuart (“Queen of Scots”), and England’s Protestant Queen Elizabeth, but rather provoked the execution of Mary, and a new round of religious strife.

In their efforts, this “Shakespeare circle” looked back affectionately to the defeat, with assistance from Louis XI’s France, of the Plantagenet tyrant Richard III, by Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, who reigned as Henry VII. Henry’s court had attracted the assistance of towering Renaissance figures, including Erasmus of Rotterdam and Thomas More, upon



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Mouthpieces in England for the Venetian anti-science school of Paolo Sarpi (above, left) and Galileo Galilei (above, right), included Francis Bacon (below, right) and Henry Wotton (below, left). Bacon campaigned against Gilbert, while Wotton became England’s Ambassador to Venice.



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whose history of Richard III Shakespeare relied.

Unfortunately, as Raleigh recounts in his *History of the World*, written during his long imprisonment in the Tower of London, Henry was succeeded by his degenerate son, the hunter, reveller, and sadistic playboy known to us as Henry VIII.

This Henry collaborated with the Spanish Inquisition's Ferdinand I, who provided him his first of six wives, Catherine, to break the League of Cambrai alliance against the Venetian financier oligarchy, and set off the Sixteenth century's cycle of warfare, directed at destroying Louis XI's legacy in the France which Ferdinand told Catherine she must convince Henry was "worse than the Turk."

At his depth, crazed by sexual obsessions encouraged by Venice's Francesco Zorzi, Henry beheaded his own teacher, England's leading citizen, now as then, Sir Thomas More. Thus unmoored, Henry went on to murder two wives and several top advisers outright.

Shakespeare's Grand Ambiguity

To advance this mission, Shakespeare, through his work, educated the largely illiterate English population, as well as the gentry, nobility, and royalty, in the history of civilization. To understand this, forget the gossips' tales about this or that play or sonnet being written to influence this or that court-prostitute in this or that way. Rather, look at the plays, the sonnets, and the other poems, in their totality, as, perhaps, the *History of the World*, which Raleigh lost his head before completing.

Forget the gossips' debate over whether Shakespeare's works are actual histories, made-up stories, or histories of his own time, disguised as past events in order to avoid the possible fatal consequences of political speech in the Elizabethan police state. They are what they are, and what Shakespeare tells us they are. The plays can be divided into the Comedies, Roman Histories, English



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France's Henry of Navarre (below) sought to heal the wounds of religious warfare, after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre (right and above).

Above, right: Huguenot leader Admiral Gaspard de Coligny.



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Marlowe's play "The Massacre at Paris" brought Navarre's message of reconciliation to England. Marlowe was murdered by spymaster Francis Walsingham. Below: Walsingham, Elizabeth I.



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Histories, and the Tragedies, which, like *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*, are largely based on national legends, which have a history-like bearing on national culture.

All of Shakespeare's work, most clearly the sonnets (clear, that is, to those not hunting for evidence of homosexual affairs), but the plays as well, are formed by the ideas of Plato on justice, statecraft, geometry, and the immortality of the soul. What Shakespeare did, and told his audiences he was doing, is to present the story of civilization as a single thought-object. Thus, he presented the Greek Classical world, including Rome, the brutish struggles of the medieval period, the blight of the treach-

erous, lying, crusading Plantagenet dynasty, and its final defeat by Henry Tudor.

He also, more circumspectly, suggested the hoped-for possibility of founding a New World, on new foundations of thought—*The Tempest*.

Although unlike his successor, Friedrich Schiller, Shakespeare left no letters or essays describing his intention, he was most direct in communicating them. Perhaps his most famous statement of the purpose of his work was in the closing scene of *Hamlet*, where, after the slaughter of Denmark’s royal family, Hamlet’s surviving friend, Horatio, makes this request:

... [G]ive order that these bodies
High on a stage be placed to the view;
And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about: so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
...
But let this same be presently perform’d,
Even while men’s minds are wild; lest more mischance
On plots and errors, happen.

The way Shakespeare was able to achieve the effect of imparting a single idea of statecraft throughout his work, is the method of ambiguity, which I call “grand,” because it is larger than the ambiguity of expression described in William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Shakespeare composed his work such that an understanding of the great intention, determining more than the two millennia of historical time, and the geographic space from Bermuda to Southwest Asia, from Norway to Egypt in the South, explicitly referenced in his work, and the entire universe of development, which is implied, determines the composition of each small part of each work.

This does not mean that the plays and poems are confused or uncertain, as to historical setting. They are very precisely situated in historical time and place, but the principles which govern movement through all time and space are exposed to view, within the narrow confines of the stage, during the time of each play’s performance, as Shakespeare specified in the prologue to *Henry V*.

I give some demonstrations of how that works. Lyndon LaRouche has pointed out how in *Julius Caesar*, the vulgarian Casca’s apparently simple remark with regard to the utterances of the Roman Platonist Cicero, “It was

Greek to me,” was a complete statement of that conflict between Cicero’s Greece and the Spartan culture of Rome, which defined Rome’s tragedy, as well as, so far, ours.

Another case is the way Shakespeare indicates, that in the history series beginning with *King John* and ending with *Richard III*, he is dealing with a single tragic idea: the character of the bloody, crusading Plantagenet dynasty. This is introduced in the very first scene of *King John*, as follows.

Two young brothers appear before the King and the Queen Mother, the younger seeking to prove that his elder brother is a bastard, and, therefore, not his father’s heir. The Bastard jocularly pleads his case, claiming his rights, despite his bastardy, until the Queen Mother and the King an-



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England’s Henry VII (left) was schooled in the court of France’s King Louis XI (right). England’s great statesman, Sir Thomas More (below, left), was raised by Henry VII’s adviser John Morton, but his pupil Henry VIII (below, right), proved to be a manipulable degenerate.



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The Bloody Plantagenets. Shakespeare's *Histories* dealt with a single tragic idea: the character of the bloody, crusading Plantagenet dynasty. **Far left:** King John (r. 1199-1216). **Left:** King Henry V (r. 1413-1422). **Right:** Promotional poster for Kenneth Branagh's production of "Henry V," in which Shakespeare's critical intention is turned, as is customary, into its opposite.



Left: Last of the Plantagenet rulers, the murderously psychotic Richard III. He was defeated at the Battle of Bosworth Field by Henry Tudor, who was crowned King Henry VII on the spot (far right). **Right:** Richard confers with his henchman Catesby, in "Richard III."



nounce their conviction that he is their grandson and nephew, the son of Richard "Coeur de Lion," or "Lion Hearted." When his grandmother offers the Bastard a knighthood, and a commission in the expeditionary force they are preparing for France, he abruptly changes sides, embraces his half-brother, and declares,

Brother by the mother's side, give me your hand:
My father gave me honor, yours gave land.
Now blessed be the hour, by night or day,
When I was got, sir Robert was away!

In this glib opportunism, the Queen recognizes, and announces, "the very spirit of Plantagenet!"

Shakespeare labors through another nine plays to extend our knowledge of this "very spirit." In the final play of the series, the Duke of Gloucester, who is to become King Richard III through his murder of a dozen or so brothers, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews, introduces the family name, by rhetorically asking, about the murder of a pair of "these Plantagenets," and then boasting that he, likewise named "Plantagenet," is responsible.

So, nowhere does Shakespeare say, "I am writing

about the evil intention of the Plantagenet clan and the culture which they fostered." Nor does he ever explain what the Plantagenets are, nor what they were. He introduces at the outset, the idea that there is such a thing as "the very spirit of Plantagenet," the which aroma is only faintly defined at the point the idea is introduced. But, by the end of the eleven plays, without Shakespeare ever once explaining that that's what he is doing, he has provided, amongst other things, a very rich understanding of the specific historical pathology named "Plantagenet," which is also the precursor to the mutated plague which devastated Europe between 1511 and 1648.

Shakespeare used this approach in *Henry V*, a play often deliberately distorted into a celebration of imperial conquest, despite Shakespeare's clearly stated contrary intent. At the outset, he presents us "Chorus," a single personality, who talks to the audience members, face to face, about their responsibility to compose the play on the stage of their intellects. He begins with the famous Prologue, with its admonition, "Think! . . . / For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our Kings, / Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times, / Turning the accomplishment of many years / Into an hour-glass."

Later, he describes Henry's triumphant return to London, not portrayed on the stage, after his victory in France. Here, in a few lines, he instructs the audience to view this triumph in the context of no fewer than three historical events: The return of Julius Caesar to Rome (which Shakespeare was also presenting on the London stage at that time), the war portrayed by the play, and then present-day England. Thus, prior to the final act of *Henry V*, Chorus instructs us:

... But now behold,
In the quick forge and working-house of thought,
How London doth pour out her citizens!
The mayor and all his brethren in best sort,
Like to the senators of the antique Rome,
With the plebeians swarming at their heels,
Go forth and fetch their conquering Caesar in:
As, by a lower but loving likelihood,
Were now the general of our gracious empress,
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,
How many would the peaceful city quit,
To welcome him! much more, and much more cause,
Did they this Harry.

The general referred to was the ill-fated Earl of Essex, then in the process of a disgraceful defeat in Ireland. Beyond those historical events which Chorus instructs his audience to reflect on, many present would, no doubt, have thought of more recent events. The maniac king, Henry VIII, whose reign was within the living memory of many of those, and which would certainly have been spoken of by fathers, mothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, of others, had pledged himself to follow in the conquering footsteps of the "great" Henry V. He, of course, failed, but did his model really succeed?

At the close of the play, Chorus leaves us with this thought:

Small time, but in that small most greatly lived
This star of England: Fortune made his sword;
By which the world's best garden be achieved,
And of it left his son imperial lord.
Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King
Of France and England, did this king succeed;
Whose state so many had the managing,
That they lost France and made his England bleed:
Which oft our stage hath shown; and, for their sake,
In your fair minds let this acceptance take.

Here, of course, he refers to the series of four plays, the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, which tell of the civil war and tyranny which followed Henry V's conquest, for which there was no remedy within England,

but which was finally ended by the arrival of the exiled Richmond's forces from France.

We, now, must also consider whether the ideas provoked by Shakespeare's presentation of these proceedings to us, have any significance for us, in our time.

The Ambiguity of Intention

The method of "Grand Ambiguity" does more than relate different historical and geographic spaces to each other, however. It also presents the audience with the Sublime. Although, unlike Schiller, Shakespeare never presented fully realized sublime personalities, such as Joan of Arc, he did present the possibility of Sublime freedom to overcome the apparently unavoidable fateful intention which tended to determine the course of events depicted.

In this, he demonstrated the superior truthfulness of Classical drama to any presentation of historical "fact." What importance is there, and what can we learn about the relevant intentions, if we know what has happened, without understanding what might have been, but wasn't done?

To portray the possibility of Sublime power to oppose unfolding fate, Shakespeare uses polyphonic composition technique. As in a musical "cross-voice" relationship, the very same words simultaneously sing different tunes.

Again, I illustrate this first with an example Lyndon LaRouche is fond of using. This is when, in *Julius Caesar*, Cassius complains to Brutus of the budding tyrant:

Why, man, he doth bstride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonorable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates:
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

This utterance is often cited, as rightly it should be, as LaRouche does, and as, no doubt Shakespeare intended, to inspire a sense of individual responsibility, not only for one's personal fate, but for the welfare of one's posterity as well.

But, the intention of the Cassius uttering these words in the play is quite different. He proves to be a snake of cruel ambition, who is using these words to flatter Brutus's sense of honor, which Cassius had just announced as "the subject of my story," and entangle him in a plot which, as defined by Cassius's rage, could have no result but to plunge the Roman world, as it did, into "domestic fury and fierce civil strife."

Does this mean we are wrong to point to Cassius's

words as an inspiration to sublime action? Or, do we rather recognize through this paradox, what Cassius and Brutus might have done?

Henry V and Erasmus

To complete this presentation of “Grand Ambiguity,” I illustrate one more dimension of complexity. That is, the introduction of an unperceived voice, which yet speaks its mind through the personages on stage, much as Hamlet says that murder, “though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ.”

Erasmus visited London, spending his time primarily with Thomas More, who was connected to the court of Henry VII, and had influence, among other things, over the education of the young Prince Henry. During Erasmus’s stay, he arranged at least one meeting with the Prince. In the same period, Erasmus was also close to the Dutch court of Margaret of Austria, where he attempted to influence Philip Hapsburg and his young son, the future Emperor Charles V. In 1514, he published *The Education of a Christian Prince*, which was dedicated to Charles, but also widely circulated in England, where young Henry had assumed the throne, married Catherine of Aragon, and supported Ferdinand’s and Pope Julius II’s “Holy Alliance” against France, upon his father’s death in 1509. Charles’s father, Philip, had likewise died suddenly (and under notoriously mysterious circumstances, but that’s a complexity we will leave out of our story for now), in 1506, leaving Charles under the competing influences of his grandfather, the Inquisition’s Ferdinand, who held the power, and Erasmus’s friend Margaret, in whose court he resided.

As I have already indicated, *Henry V*, while presenting the story indicated by its title, would also have provoked reflection on the more recent history of Henry VIII. Erasmus’s *Education*, would have recalled that story in conjunction with the corresponding history of Charles V, whose son, the later Philip II of Spain, was known to Shakespeare’s England much as Hitler was known to Franklin Roosevelt’s United States four centuries later. He was the one-time consort of the “Catholic” Queen,

“Bloody” Mary, and the titular head of the Inquisition’s war against France, The Netherlands, and England.

There is no doubt that in *Henry V*, without naming him, Shakespeare makes use of Erasmus’s voice, from the well-known *Education of Christian Prince*. I start with this undeniable demonstration from Henry’s famous “Ceremony” soliloquy, which I quote only in part:

I am a king that find thee, and I know
’Tis not the balm, the sceptre and the ball,
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,
The farced title running ’fore the king,
The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp
That beats upon the high shore of this world,
No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,



Desiderius Erasmus (left) dedicated his “Education of a Christian Prince” to the future Emperor Charles V (below). Shakespeare drew on its themes of statecraft in composing his “Henry V.”



Charles V’s son, later King Philip II of Spain (right), became a creature of the Inquisition. Philip married Henry VIII’s daughter Mary Tudor (left).



Scenes from "Henry IV, Part 1." Prince Hal, the future King Henry V, in the tutelage of the drunken Sir John Falstaff, Act I.

Falstaff, with hangers-on Mistress Quickly and Bardolph, at the Boar's Head Tavern, Act IV.



Who with a body fill'd and vacant mind
Gets him to rest, cramm'd with distressful bread;
Never sees horrid night, the child of hell,
But, like a lackey, from the rise to set
Sweats in the eye of Phoebus and all night
Sleeps in Elysium; next day after dawn,
Doth rise and help Hyperion to his horse,
And follows so the ever-running year,
With profitable labor, to his grave:
And, but for ceremony, such a wretch,
Winding up days with toil and nights with sleep,
Had the fore-hand and vantage of a king.
The slave, a member of the country's peace,
Enjoys it; but in gross brain little wots
What watch the king keeps to maintain the peace,
Whose hours the peasant best advantages.

Compare this to Erasmus's *Christian Prince*:

If all that makes a king is a chain, a sceptre, robes of royal purple, and a train of attendants, what after all is to prevent the actors in a drama who come on the stage decked with all the pomp of state from being regarded as real kings? . . . Do not think that Christ is found in mere ceremonies.

Does the fact that Shakespeare has Henry speak the words of Erasmus, demonstrate that Henry is a Prince such as Erasmus was trying to train? If not, in what way did Shakespeare employ his friend Erasmus in this play?

To answer this question, we highlight other ways in which Shakespeare introduces Erasmus's voice into the stage of consciousness of his audience members' minds. Although, necessarily, in selecting examples, I use little bits of Erasmus and little bits of Shakespeare, this is not to prove that this list of individual points adds up to "total agreement," or "major agreement"; but, rather, to show how, by presenting necessarily finite action on a physical stage,

bound, as Chorus said at the beginning, "within this wooden O," Shakespeare portrays, on the stage of the mind, the entire universe as Plato and Erasmus understood it.

So, we start before the beginning. In the *Henry IV* plays, the future *Henry V* is portrayed as wild Prince Hal, who revels in the company of a band of drunken con artists and thieves, led by Sir John Falstaff. What Erasmus says about this, is,

You will have to keep at a distance from [the Prince's] sight and hearing the usual crowd of pleasure-seeking youngsters, drunkards, foul-mouthed people, and especially the flatterers, as long as his moral development is not yet firmly established.

And yet, Hal has said that he knows he is preparing for better things. But, how does he understand this? After Chorus's opening preparation, Shakespeare presents us two churchmen, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely, who scheme to manipulate Henry into the French war, which was to be the chief subject of the play, as it was of Henry's reign. Discussing how they might best accomplish this, Canterbury remarks on Hal's rapid conversion from his youthful ways: "Never was such a sudden scholar made."

Contrast this sudden change to Erasmus's prescription for the education of a Prince, a view he shared with Plato,

Unless you are a philosopher you cannot be a prince, only a tyrant. . . . Further, you must realize that "philosopher" does not mean someone who is clever at dialectics or science but someone who rejects illusory appearance and undauntedly seeks out and follows what is true and good. Being a philosopher is in practice the same as being a Christian; only the terminology is different.

So, the question is posed, is a "scholar," particularly a

“sudden scholar,” the same as a philosopher, which, Erasmus says, is the same as a Christian?

We continue. Just as in the play, a central issue Erasmus dealt with was the issue of war. Suffice it to say, Erasmus was convinced that the cases in which war was justified were extraordinarily rare. Referring to the Holy League, in which Ferdinand joined with Venice against France, he wrote,

No eclipse ever afflicted mankind so gravely as the dispute between Pope Julius and King Louis of France, which we have witnessed and wept over only recently.

And further,

What word, then, do we think should be used when Christian draws the sword against Christian? . . . However, I do not think, either, that war against the Turks should be hastily undertaken, remembering first of all that the kingdom of Christ was created, spread, and secured by very different means. . . . In addition we can see that wars of this kind have too frequently been made an excuse to fleece the Christian people—and then nothing else has been done. . . . Do not think that you have done your duty by Christ well enough if you have sent a fleet against the Turks or built a shrine or a little monastery somewhere.

How does our protagonist, King Henry, measure against Erasmus’s standard?

He launches his invasion of France based on a purely legalistic argument advanced by the conniving clerics, Ely and Canterbury. In preparing for the invasion, he has a pang of conscience, and, just as Erasmus warned against, he prays to the “God of Battles,” reminding him of the little shrines he has built, to expiate his own father’s “fault” in assassinating his predecessor, Richard II, to get to the throne:

I Richard’s body have interred anew;
And on it have bestow’d more contrue tears
Than from it issued forced drops of blood:
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
Who twice a-day their wither’d hands hold up
Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built
Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard’s soul.

Erasmus goes further, saying,

[E]ven the most just of wars brings with it a train of evils— if indeed any war can really be called just. But while he is learning to wage war, he is compelled to expose young men to all kinds of peril and to make countless orphans, widows, and childless old people, and to reduce countless others to beggary and misery, often in a single hour.

Shakespeare uses a discussion amongst soldiers, including the disguised King, on the battlefield at night, awaiting the carnage which morning will bring, to raise this issue. After the King claims of his expedition, “his cause being just and his quarrel honorable,” a soldier answers:

But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all “We died at such a place”; some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left.

It is this discussion which leads to Henry’s diatribe, which we cited above, the “Ceremony” soliloquy. Erasmus, in his “Ceremony” discussion, describes the responsibility of a monarch, saying,

A good prince has the obligation of looking to the welfare of his people even at the cost of his own life if need be.

Henry woos Katharine, Princess of France, Act V. As Chorus later warns, this dynastic marriage could not bring lasting peace.



Scenes from “Henry V.” Henry exhorts his troops to attack the city of Harfleur, at the start of his invasion of France, Act III.



The Granger Collection

Rather than accept the responsibility of a prince, Henry protests:

Upon the king! let us our lives, our souls,
Our debts, our careful wives,
Our children and our sins lay on the king!
We must bear all. O hard condition,
Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
But his own wringing!

We continue just a bit more. In considering any extraction of wealth from his nation, including the resources to wage war, Erasmus admonishes,

[t]he conscientious ruler must continually remind himself how cruel it is that on these accounts so many thousands of men with their wives and children should be starving to death at home, getting into debt, and being driven to complete desperation.

By comparison: After Henry's "Ceremony" protest, as morning arrives, he returns to his command-post in his own guise, and prepares to rally his troops for the coming battle. As he does so, one of his officers reminds him of those unemployed and in desperation, whom he has forgotten at home, calling out, "O that we now had here but one ten thousand of those men in England that do no work to-day!" It is in response to this call, that Henry launches into his famous "We happy few" speech, which piece of demagogic dissembling, the Empire fanatics edit to use in their military propaganda. Despite his earlier protest of the justice of his cause, Henry offers no reason, whatsoever, why the troops should fight, other than that they would feel bad at the memorial day celebrations if they had not, and that it is better to have fewer comrades to share the glory with, declaring, "If it be a sin to covet honor, then I am the most offending soul alive."

We make one last point in this section. That is, prior to Chorus's closing remarks, it would appear, if one ignores certain troubling mentions of minor matters such as rape and pillage, that an amicable peace has been concluded through the marriage of Henry to the French Princess, Katharine.

But, the issue of marriage alliances is one which Erasmus has also considered, and repeatedly cautioned against, warning,

Even if a marriage brings about peace, it certainly cannot be perpetual. When one party dies, the chain of concord is broken. But if a peace were to be based on true principles, it would be stable and lasting. Someone will object that the begetting of children will perpetuate an alliance. But why then are wars most often fought between those who are the closest kin?

With this, I have only touched on the most significant

details demonstrating Shakespeare's employment, in this play, of his great Renaissance mentor, Erasmus. But, I assure you that, if you study the plays with this in mind, and a grounding in their work, you will find that Erasmus and More, and behind them Plato, glimmer as Shakespeare's guide and conscience throughout.

Will's Reach Beyond the Grave

Although Shakespeare's group failed, during their natural lives, to prevent the degeneration of England, and the new round of European-wide warfare which began two years after Shakespeare's death, they furthered the process which created a non-sectarian—actually, anti-sectarian—republic, in the New World. This was by no means limited to educating those who continued Raleigh's and Harriott's colonizing work.

The greatest German playwright and poet, Friedrich Schiller, for instance, mid-way between Shakespeare's time and ours, wrote two plays, *Don Carlos* and *Mary Stuart*, which are a direct continuation of Shakespeare's Histories, and tell a story of treachery which was, perhaps, like the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, too close to current plots and personalities to have been successfully told by Shakespeare himself. Schiller's *Maid of Orleans* reviews a section of the story told in *Henry VI*, from a different perspective, and his *Wallenstein* trilogy gives an account of the carnage of the 1618-1648 religious wars, which closely followed the deaths of Navarre and Shakespeare, but which were ended through Cardinal Mazarin's Treaty of Westphalia, based on the principle of reconciliation championed by Shakespeare.

Schiller was part of that same German circle, founded by Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Lessing, which collaborated, notably through the great mathematician Abraham Kästner, with Benjamin Franklin and his circles in the founding of the United States. They also launched a project to use the revival of Shakespeare's work in the forging of a German national theater. Through this revival, Shakespeare, rescued from centuries of editions so corrupt as to make even Laurence Olivier or Kenneth Branagh (but probably not Mel Gibson) blush, was able to march alongside Franklin, Washington, von Steuben, Kosciuszko, Lafayette, Schiller, John Quincy Adams, Percy Shelley, John Keats, Abraham Lincoln, and all of the great heroes in the founding and preservation of our Republic.

So, we now, too, renew our dedication to the as yet unfinished mission of William Shakespeare and the army which has joined him across the centuries.

Stephanie Ezrol contributed research on Gilbert, Bacon, and Sarpi.