Spring 2015

“Conscience is but a word that cowards use:” Richard III’s Machiavellian Impulse

Jay Bouchard

Carroll College, Helena, MT

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.carroll.edu/langlit_theses

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation

Bouchard, Jay, ""Conscience is but a word that cowards use:” Richard III's Machiavellian Impulse" (2015). Languages and Literature Undergraduate Theses. 4.

https://scholars.carroll.edu/langlit_theses/4

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Languages and Literature at Carroll Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages and Literature Undergraduate Theses by an authorized administrator of Carroll Scholars. For more information, please contact tkratz@carroll.edu.
SIGNATURE PAGE

This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the
Department of Honors Scholars Program.

Director
Date

Reader
Date

Reader
Date
“Conscience is but a word that cowards use.”
Richard III’s Machiavellian Impulse
Abstract:
This thesis focuses on William Shakespeare’s play, Richard III and Niccolo Machiavelli’s political treatise, The Prince. This thesis begins by contextualizing the presence of Machiavelli’s work in Early Modern England. The first chapter of the work addresses the extent to which Shakespeare would have encountered Machiavelli before writing Richard III. The subsequent chapters then examine Richard III’s development as a “Machiavellian” ruler, and particularly how his political tactics align with those presented in Machiavelli’s The Prince. This thesis then argues that while Richard appears dramatically to audiences as a self-proclaimed Machiavellian villain, he ultimately fails to fulfill Machiavelli’s instructions and thus fails to maintain the power he has violently acquired. Richard employs cruelty irresponsibly and his conscience ultimately disrupts his ambitions and proves to be the most prominent factor that limits his ability to succeed as a Machiavellian prince. I argue that in rendering Richard’s failure to fulfill Machiavelli’s instructions, Shakespeare brings into question whether or not a purely Machiavellian ruler is a desirable or even practical possibility.
Introduction

After more than five hundred years of mystery, the disfigured remains of King Richard III were discovered beneath a car park in Leicester, England in 2012. One of the most notorious and bloody English monarchs, Richard III was killed at the battle of Bosworth in 1485 and for more than five centuries his remains were missing. Only a few weeks ago, the bones of the last York monarch were reinterred with great royal pomp and circumstance at an Anglican Cathedral in Leicester (Burns). Whether Richard will now rest in peace is one of several questions which the thesis which follows interrogates. For, with the discovery and royal internment of his misshapen bones has come a reassessment of his infamous reputation that was largely shaped in people’s imaginations by Shakespeare’s dramatic exaggerations of his villainy in The Tragedy of King Richard III. Besides rendering Richard as a royal criminal, Shakespeare brought to the stage Richard’s conscience and depicted in great depth the moral unrest of the crooked King, leaving us to wonder whether or not he will in fact rest in peace in his new regal tomb in Leicester.

The reputations of King Richard III (1452–1485) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616) are inextricably intertwined. For, having cultivated his talent for dramatic scenes and soliloquies, the young Shakespeare turned his talents to the character of Richard, creating The Tragedy of King Richard III, his first great stage success, launching his career as England’s greatest playwright. In doing so, Shakespeare fashioned indelibly in the imaginations of future generations the murderous and conniving character of King Richard who he depicts as dying on the battlefield at Bosworth after desperately pleading
to exchange his kingdom for a horse. Before Richard is killed in the final scene of the play, he rises to the throne employing duplicitous behavior and unremitting cruelty. In fact, he appears a blatant Machiavellian figure who behaves with little regard to morality until the final act of the play.

William Shakespeare was not a political theorist, but neither was he a stranger to the political realities of his day. Nearly all of his plays, including several of the comedies, reflect not just the political realities of his own age, but what we have now come to recognize as the emergent political thought and theories that influenced the Early Modern age in Europe. Most of Shakespeare’s works, in fact, present to audiences a central political figure, either from English history, Roman history or from legend, who strives to acquire and maintain power. Among these none is more notorious than King Richard III, a ruthless political figure who is crippled both physically and strategically, and the only Shakespeare character to explicitly align himself with the political instructions of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), claiming that he will best Machiavelli’s controversial teachings on how to get and keep power. Examining Richard III’s development as a “Machiavellian” ruler, and particularly how his political tactics align with those presented in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, this thesis argues that while Richard appears dramatically to audiences as a self-proclaimed Machiavellian villain, he ultimately fails to fulfill Machiavelli’s instructions and thus fails to maintain the power he has violently acquired. Richard employs cruelty irresponsibly and his conscience disrupts his ambitions and proves to be the most prominent factor that limits his ability to succeed as a Machiavellian prince. I argue that in rendering Richard’s failure to fulfill Machiavelli’s
instructions, Shakespeare brings into question whether or not a purely Machiavellian ruler is even possible.

The Richard who steps upon the stage in Shakespeare’s works proclaiming his determination to hack his way to the throne with a bloody ax would have been a very familiar historical character to Shakespeare’s audience. He appears first in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* plays as the Duke of Gloucester, emerging as a powerful force of political rhetoric and violence in *Henry VI, Part 3*, and then becoming the central figure of the play that bears his name, *The Tragedy of Richard III*, performed first in in late 1592 or early 1593.

Of course the young playwright who rendered this version of *Richard III* wrote for very a very different purpose than Niccolo Machiavelli. Machiavelli was presenting controversial ideas about human power, political rule and the fortunes of various states, using for his examples actual historical events and figures. Shakespeare, some eighty years later, was in the business of popular entertainment, bringing to the stage a variety of works to draw audiences to the theatre. His treatment of English history had a special appeal for his London audiences. As one of his earlier renderings of English history, *Richard III* is necessarily informed by moral and political concerns, but his play, in contrast to Machiavelli, is not a political treatise in the traditional sense.

The first chapter of this thesis contextualizes the presence of Machiavelli’s ideas in late 16th-century England. *The Prince* was written in Italian between 1512 and 1513, roughly eighty years before Shakespeare’s play. *The Prince* was not published until 1532. Whether or not Shakespeare had direct access to Machiavelli’s text is debatable. However, the presence of Machiavelli’s name (from Richard’s own mouth) in
Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part III* makes evident that at the very least Shakespeare had knowledge and interest in Machiavelli’s work, if not direct access. Chapter one engages with secondary-source material in order to explain the extent to which Shakespeare had direct access to *The Prince* and also addresses what “Machiavellian” would have meant to Shakespeare and his audience. Though a translated version of *The Prince* itself may not have reached England by 1592, summary versions of the text were circulating and Elizabethan playwrights were creating “Machiavellian” characters before Shakespeare’s *Richard III* emerged. By examining Shakespeare’s plays and the content of summary versions of *The Prince*, I argue in this chapter that Shakespeare and his audience had, at the very least, a general knowledge of Machiavelli and his political thought by 1592. This claim is essential in order to support the broader thesis that Shakespeare’s rendering of Richard offers a cautionary comment on the limitations of Machiavellian rule.

The second chapter treats the primary texts by these two authors directly. I cite several instances of Richard’s behavior which align with the tenants of Machiavelli’s instructions—I discuss the way Richard successfully capitalizes on fortune (*The Prince* Ch. XXV) and how Richard appears to be religious, merciful, and faithful (Prince Ch. 18) as necessary. I document Richard’s behavior as he rises to the throne—especially his behavior in the first three acts of the play, before he is crowned King. In this chapter I evaluate Richard’s tactics and demonstrate the manner in which he succeeds to be a Machiavellian prince.

The third chapter examines how Richard ultimately fails to follow Machiavellian instruction. I rely primarily on Ch. XIII of *The Prince*, which discusses cruelty well used and badly used. I examine the many murders orchestrated by Richard in an effort to prove
that he uses cruelty badly—allowing his crimes to accumulate and public opinion to drop. This chapter then moves to examine conscience—a word that does not appear in Machiavelli’s most prominent work. In the final act of Shakespeare’s play Richard is undone—he loses control of his throne and is conquered by Richmond. I argue in this chapter that a key instrument of Richard’s undoing is his conscience. In obtaining the throne Richard commits crimes so bloody that he is haunted by his actions (act 5, scene 3). I cite the several instances in which conscience emerges in the play and in some cases serves as an impediment to action. The chapter first examines Queen Margaret’s curses from act I and the importance of their fruition in act V. I then document conscience’s role in Richard’s behavior and also in some of the minor characters like the two murderers sent to kill Clarence (act 1, scene 4), Buckingham (act 4, scene 2), Tyrell (act 4, scene 3), and the murderers sent to kill the young prince. All of these characters are crippled by their consciences, offering evidence that conscience inevitably inhibits necessary (occasionally Machiavellian) action.

The final chapter claims that Richard III, taken as a case study, undermines the possibility of successful Machiavellian rule and suggests the incompatibility of a Christian Machiavellian. This chapter will further claim that while Richard III is not a thesis driven work, it demonstrates Shakespeare’s likely thinking towards Machiavelli’s ideas. The final chapter acknowledges the lack of successful Christian princes in Machiavelli’s work and argues that both conscience and Christianity are incompatible with Machiavellian rule. Furthermore, the final chapter draws attention to other Shakespeare plays—Macbeth, Hamlet—to demonstrate a pattern of conscience undermining leaders in Shakespeare’s folio.
Chapter 1

The likelihood of Shakespeare’s acquaintance with Machiavelli’s work

Though we cannot determine conclusively which texts Shakespeare read and which he did not, an analysis of texts circulating Elizabethan England can lend clues as to which texts he may have encountered during his career as a playwright. This chapter will predominantly examine the likelihood of Shakespeare’s access to Machiavelli’s work. However, it is important to note that Shakespeare had definite historical sources that he relied on in writing Richard III in addition to possible political influences like Machiavelli. Richard III was a historical figure and much of what Shakespeare put on the Early Modern stage was taken from historical records of Richard’s rise and reign. Among those historical records is the History of King Richard III written by Thomas More between 1513-14 and printed in 1557. More’s history reinforces the image of Richard as villain on a bloody march to the royal throne. Given the similarity of Shakespeare’s play with More’s history, many other scholars have agreed that “[Thomas] More’s Richard was grafted almost complete into Shakespeare’s play” (Breen 465). Shakespeare’s sources for the play also included Raphael Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland published in 1587, and Edward Hall’s The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York, published in 1548. According to Joseph Candido, these two works were “unmistakable sources for Richard III [and] draw the earlier sections of their narrative, usually word for word, from More” (139). Candido also notes that More, Hall, and Holinshed, were Tudor historians intent on rendering Richard as a murderer and criminal—a version of history that Shakespeare capitalized upon when he wrote Richard III.
I mention Shakespeare’s sources here because it is important to remember that while Machiavelli may have influenced Shakespeare’s rendering of Richard, Shakespeare was undoubtedly relying on historical record while fashioning his character. On stage, Richard is not a purely fictional character like some of Shakespeare’s other villains. Richard was a historical figure and Shakespeare relied on and adhered to historical sources. Therefore, it is important to qualify the claim that Shakespeare crafted Richard with only Machiavelli’s teaching in mind. As this thesis aims to prove, Machiavelli was a likely influence on Richard III. Still, King Richard III held the throne of England before Machiavelli began writing political treatises and based on the Tudor histories available to Shakespeare, Richard did ‘Machiavellian’ things before such a term existed. That said, many scholars argue that Shakespeare had access to Machiavelli’s works before he wrote Richard III and that this access influenced the language and behavior of the character Shakespeare put on stage.

In determining the manner in which Richard III comments upon Machiavelli’s work, it is essential to measure Machiavelli’s reputation in Early Modern England and discuss the access Shakespeare might have had to Machiavelli’s texts. According to Joe Falocco, “For many years, scholars assumed that Shakespeare had little access to genuine Machiavellian thought and that his major sources of information were materials produced in connection with the anti-Machiavelli hysteria that followed the St. Bartholomew’s day massacre” (64). In 1572, Queen Catherine of France organized the massacre of many thousands (estimates vary) of French Protestants by Catholics. While the massacre led to political and religious instability in France, it also marred Machiavelli’s reputation, perhaps unjustly, in much of Europe. After the massacre, many Europeans, and especially
English Protestants, began attributing tyrannical acts such as the St. Bartholomew’s day massacre to the influences of Machiavelli’s writing. “Through subsequent decades of sectarian strife,” writes J.S. Maloy, “accounts of Catholic atrocities accompanied by attributions to Machiavellian influence poured out of Protestant presses” (452). It was in this atmosphere, argues Maloy, that one of the most prominent anti-Machiavelli propaganda pieces emerged. In 1576 Innocent Gentillet published the *Contre-Machiavel*, which “stamped an enduring image of Machiavelli as an advisor to tyrants like Catherine on the minds of his readers” (452). Furthermore, Maloy suggests that “Protestants around Europe adopted the term ‘Machiavellian’ as a descriptor of political immorality: committing injustice under the sacred seal of authority, fomenting public disaster for private benefit” (452).

Gentillet’s work appeared first in 1576—though his name and publishing information were not included with the manuscript (Bawcutt 864). According to N.W Bawcutt, Gentillet’s *Contre Machiavel* had three parts: “The first (three maxims) dealt with the prince’s use of counsellors . . . the second, (ten maxims) with the function of religion and state; and the third . . . (thirty seven maxims) with the ruler’s political behavior” (864). After each maxim Gentillet provided a summary, citing either Machiavelli’s *The Prince* or *Discourses* (864). While Gentillet’s work first appeared in French, Bawcutt notes that a Latin translation directed at an English audience emerged in 1577. Moreover, he notes that while the first official English version of Gentillet’s work did not appear until 1602, based on library records and text dedications, an English version of his work may well have existed in manuscript form as early as 1578. Bawcutt uses the historical records to demonstrate numerous English references to Gentillet’s
work before 1590 and to prove that many Englishmen owned Latin copies of the *Contre-Machiavel* that were circulating between booksellers in London and Cambridge in the early 1580s (Bawcutt 864-72). From his research, Bawcutt concludes that “It would be difficult to estimate precisely how well known Gentillet was to Elizabethan readers . . . [but] it is clear that his book, especially in its Latin translation, began to circulate in England very soon after its publication” (873).

Scholars debate the extent to which Gentillet’s version of Machiavelli influenced Elizabethan dramatists. Many scholars, in fact, suggest that Gentillet’s work was not the only source of Machiavellian thought circulating in Early Modern England. Irving Ribner points out that “it has been accepted as commonplace among literary historians that the ‘Machiavel’ of the Elizabethan drama developed as the result of the false impressions of Machiavelli’s political thought disseminated in England by the *Contre Machiavel*” (153). However, Ribner notes that Gentillet’s work was not the only source of Machiavellian thought in Early Modern England. While it is commonly held that the first English translations of Machiavelli’s work were made in 1636 (*Discourses*) and 1640 (*The Prince*) by Edward Dacres, according to Ribner, “there were at least three separate translations of *The Prince*, each completely distinct from that of Dacres” circulating before 1600 (154). Furthermore, Ribner concludes:

All of these manuscripts were evidently widely circulated . . . and attest to the great popularity which Machiavelli’s works themselves enjoyed and to the great eagerness with which they were sought. It is thus evident that Elizabethans had adequate access to Machiavelli’s own works, and that
these works must have figured at least as prominently in the popular estimation of him as did any other element we can cite (154).

Joe Falocco also notes that for many years scholars misidentified Gentillet’s work “as the [primary] work which actually taught the Elizabethan dramatists what they knew about Machiavelli” (65). Anti-Machiavelli propaganda was circulating in Early Modern England and therefore some scholars argue that “it was impossible for Elizabethans to have access to the actual thoughts of Machiavelli” (Falocco 65). In the last half-century, though, the thesis that Elizabethans had no or little access Machiavelli’s original work has been discredited by scholars like Ribner and Felix Raab, who in 1964 pointed out that “publishing records were not a fair indication of a work’s popularity since the science of printing itself was in infancy during this period and many manuscript copies of Machiavelli’s works in Italian, Latin, French, and English circulated throughout Elizabethan England” (Falocco 65).

More recently, Christopher Morris has added to the emerging evidence that Machiavelli’s works were circulating England well before 1636. Morris notes that “there were manuscript translations [of The Prince and Discourses]. Seven of The Prince are known to have been in circulation before 1600. One was possessed and possibly owned by Thomas Kyd the dramatist. Three manuscript translations of Discourses are also known although two of these were incomplete” (416). While Morris notes that English translations of Machiavelli’s works were present in England before 1600, he points out that “educated Englishmen often knew Italian; and for them printed editions of the almost complete works [of Machiavelli] became available between 1584 and 1588. The books were in fact produced in England by printer John Wolfe” (417). Like Bawcutt, Morris
examines dedications and historical record to prove the presence of Machiavelli in Tudor and Elizabethan England.

While historical evidence suggests Machiavelli’s works had made their way to England before Shakespeare began writing plays, it is still necessary to consider the extent to which he and other dramatists would have encountered Machiavellian thought. Morris notes that “over 400 direct references to Machiavelli can be found in Elizabethan literature and of these the vast majority occur, significantly, in drama” (423). According to Morris, though the script has since been lost, there was a play actually entitled Machiavel which was acted on stage several times in 1591, a year before Shakespeare’s Richard III emerged on stage. Furthermore, “[Christopher] Marlowe first brought onto the public stage an actual character called Machiavel” in The Jew of Malta”—written and performed approximately two years before Richard III (424). Shakespeare may have encountered Machiavellian thought from translations of Gentillet’s Contre-Machiavel. Or perhaps he had access to a translation of Machiavelli’s actual work. Maybe he was merely influenced by the plays written by his contemporaries like Christopher Marlowe. Regardless, Recent scholarship “suggests that the plays of Shakespeare—particularly the later plays including the second tetralogy—demonstrate a political consciousness directly informed by Machiavelli” (Falocco 66).

In the early 1590s many theaters were “closed due to plague and censorship,” and during this time “Shakespeare may have lived as a poet-in-residence in the household of his patron, the Earl of Southampton” -- “the most Italianate of Elizabethan courtiers” (Falocco 66). Falacco suggests that “it would not have been surprising if Shakespeare, living in this atmosphere full of things Italian, became familiar with the writings of the
most famous (and infamous) Italian of the century—Niccolo Machiavelli” (66). The possible circulation of Machiavellian thought in Early Modern England and the fact that Shakespeare may have lived with the Earl of Southampton led Anne Barton to write “I think myself that it would be more surprising if it could be proved that Shakespeare had managed to avoid reading Machiavelli than if concrete evidence were to turn up that he had” (122). In any case, the circumstantial evidence suggests that the possible time Shakespeare spent with the Earl of Southampton likely familiarized him with Machiavelli’s work.

Still, we cannot know with certainty the extent to which Shakespeare was familiar with Machiavellian thought before writing Richard III. What we can be sure of, though, is that Shakespeare was familiar with Machiavelli’s reputation before writing the play—as is evident from Machiavelli’s name in the mouth of Richard Duke of Gloucester in his 1591 play Henry VI Part III. Richard famously declares “I can add colours to the chameleon, / Change shapes with Proteus for advantages, / And set the murderous Machiavel to school” (3.2.191-93).

These lines are extremely telling in that Shakespeare’s historical sources would not have put Machiavelli’s name in Richard’s mouth. These lines are a deliberate move on Shakespeare’s part to align Richard with Machiavelli’s teachings. Richard’s character indeed attempts to set the ‘murderous Machiavel’ to school in the 1592 play under examination in this thesis. And the rendering of Richard’s character was likely influenced by Niccolo Machiavelli. While the extent of Machiavelli’s influence on Shakespeare remains indeterminate, through critical assessment of primary evidence, it is a certainty that Shakespeare was aware of Machiavelli’s reputation and thought and that he and
select members of his audience may well have been well acquainted with Machiavelli’s notorious writings—writings that are manifest in the rendering of Richard Duke of Gloucester and ultimately King Richard III.
Chapter 2—Richard III as a Machiavellian Ruler

Part 1: Richard’s use of Fortune: Adapting to the qualities of the times

While this thesis claims that King Richard III is an inadequate Machiavellian ruler, undermined most by conscience, it is first necessary to consider the ways in which Shakespeare fashioned Richard to be familiar to his audience as a Machiavellian. As chapter one points out, Shakespeare and his audience were likely aware of Machiavelli’s reputation, and Isaiah Berlin notes that among most Elizabethans, Machiavelli was regarded as “a man inspired by the Devil to lead good men to their doom, the great subverter, the teacher of evil” (35). It is clearly with this reputation in mind that Shakespeare constructed his notorious character. Richard proves to be a Machiavellian on several fronts in his rise to power, but most notably he makes daring use of fortune and he appears to keep faith, deceiving those around him, while necessarily employing evil tactics.

Shakespeare’s play opens with a famous soliloquy by Richard, bemoaning the “winter of our discontent” (1.1.1). It is in this first speech by Richard that he admits he is “determined to prove a villain” (1.1.30). It is also in this opening soliloquy that we get the first taste of Richard’s Machiavellian nature. While a cursory reading of this passage might suggest that Richard’s Machiavellian nature lies in his determination to do evil, it is rather in the way he proves determined to, as Machiavelli instructs in The Prince, “adapt his mode of proceeding to the qualities of the times” (99). In Chapter twenty five of his work, Machiavelli addresses fortune and notes that “it might be true that fortune is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern” (98). Machiavelli uses this chapter to instruct princes how to best make use of
fortune since, as he notes, men cannot control fortune. He likens fortune to a violent river—one that may flood and ruin the surrounding land. However, he argues that a prudent ruler will build a metaphorical canal to divert the river so that its flood “is neither so wanton nor so damaging” (98).

He then addresses whether it is better to be cautious or impetuous in the face of fortune. Machiavelli invokes the rather alarming image of fortune as a goddess who needs to be raped, saying “it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike down. And one sees that she lets herself be won more by the impetuous than by those who proceed coldly” (101). Machiavelli argues that fortune favors the impetuous over the cautious.

Richard notes in his first words that he is discontented by the qualities of the times—peace has fallen over England and he is frustrated that the dread and excitement of war have left his homeland. Furthermore, Richard calls attention to his physical misfortune—he is “cheated of feature by dissembling nature, / Deformed, unfinished, sent before [his] time / Into this breathing world” (1.1.19-20). The fortune of times and the misfortune of his physical appearance are factors over which, Machiavelli argues, Richard has no control. In his opening soliloquy, though, Richard outlines his plan to make use of the circumstances at hand to rise to the throne. Already, Richard declares, “Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous, / By drunken prophecies, libel and dreams, / To set my brother Clarence and the King / In deadly hate, the one against the other” (1.1.32-25). Richard demonstrates neither hesitation nor caution in his first words. As Machiavelli instructs, he is impetuous and daring in the face of fortune, planning to eliminate his brothers and become the King of England.
In addition to peace in England, fortune has also provided Richard a sick, declining, brother—King Edward. Richard, of course, has neither pity nor remorse toward his ailing brother. Instead, he sees this as good fortune and capitalizes on the opportunity to move closer to the crown. He is optimistic that Edward will die, but his brother Clarence is next in line to be King of England. Knowing that Edward is frail and likely worried about the security of his rule, Richard plants a rumor in the form of prophesy convincing King Edward that “a wizard told him that by “G” / His issue disinherited should be” (1.1.60-1). Predictably, Edward suspects Clarence, whose Christian name is George. Therefore, Clarence is sent to the Tower of London by the King, the result of a successfully deceptive act conceived and orchestrated by Richard. Especially in the early scenes of the play, Richard proves that he can adapt to the fortune of his times. While is he is discontented by peace in England and by his physical appearance, he uses the time of peace to aggressively pursue the crown.

*Part II: Richard’s faithlessness: Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are*

Chapter eighteen of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* provides perhaps his most unsettling advice to princes. In this chapter Machiavelli advises princes to appear faithful, but when necessary, employ evil measures. Machiavelli’s reputation in Elizabethan England reflected much of the content of chapter eighteen, and it was likely from this writing that Early Modern dramatists and theater-goers came to view Machiavellian thought. While Shakespeare and his audience might have been familiar with Machiavelli’s writing on fortune, they would have been more likely to recognize the
 alarming manner in which Richard employs the tactics from Machiavelli’s chapter titled “In What Mode Faith Should Be Kept by Princes.”

Machiavelli endorses faithlessness and disloyalty in this chapter. He writes, “the princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith and have known how to get around men’s brains with their astuteness; and in the end they have overcome those who have founded themselves on loyalty” (69). Machiavelli observes that the most successful rulers are those who have been faithless and deceptive. Furthermore, Machiavelli writes, “he who deceives will always find someone who will let himself be deceived” (70). Richard’s deception is evident in the first scene of the play when, as already discussed, Richard deceives King Edward and Clarence. Richard convinces the ailing King that his throne is in jeopardy and then plants the seed that leads to Clarence’s imprisonment. Richard finds in both his brothers, as Machiavelli predicts he would, men that let themselves be deceived.

Richard proves a Machiavellian dissembler again in the second scene of the play when he woos the pathetically pliable Lady Anne. In the last lines of scene 1, Richard announces to the audience his plans to woo and marry Anne. “I’ll marry Warwick’s youngest daughter,” Richard Proclaims. “What though I killed her husband and her father? / The readiest way to make the wench amends / Is to become her husband and her father” (1.1.158-60). Richard recognizes that his quest to woo Anne will be met with anger and scorn, but he sees the union as a political opportunity that can propel him even closer to the throne.

At the outset of the scene Lady Anne enters in grief, following the corpse of her father-in-law and still mourning the death of her husband. Both men have been killed by
Richard and Anne is well aware. When Richard approaches Anne he is met with the bitterness he predicted. She calls him a “Foul Devil,” and warns him, “for God’s sake, hence, and trouble us not, / For thou hast made the happy earth thy hell, / Filled it with cursing cries and deep exclaims” (1.2. 51-4). When Anne accuses Richard of murdering her husband and father-in-law, Richard first denies the accusation, but then confesses, claiming astonishingly: “Your beauty was the cause of that effect—/ Your beauty, that did haunt me in my sleep / To undertake the death of all the world, / So I might live one hour in your sweet bosom” (1.2.130-4). After this improbable courtship and several subsequent lines of bitter exchange, Richard offers Anne his sword, telling her to slay him for what he has done. Anne ultimately refuses to take Richard’s life, and, having spit in his face fewer than a hundred lines before, now sadly submits to his will and accepts a ring from him.

Having successfully wooed Anne, Richard proclaims his Machiavellian triumph to the audience in the play’s second soliloquy:

```
Was ever woman in this humor wooed?
Was ever woman in this humor won?
I’ll have her, but I will not keep her long.
What that I killed her husband and his father,
To take her in her heart’s extremist hate,
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
The bleeding witness of my hatred by,
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,
And I no friends to back my suit at all
But the plain devil and dissembling looks?
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing! (1.2.247-58).
```

After courting Anne, Richard announces to his audience that he is in fact a dissembler—he has gained Anne’s favor for his political ambition but he will not keep her long. Like Richard’s brothers Edward and Clarence, Anne proves to welcome his deception. While
Anne comes to accept Richard as remorseful and charming, he revels in the fact that he is neither of these things, and yet successful in his dissembling. In fact, Richard observes, “Upon my life, [Anne] finds, although I cannot, / Myself to be a marv’lous proper man” (1.2. 274-5). Richard’s observation is strikingly similar to Machiavelli’s observation in Chapter eighteen of *The Prince*: “Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are” (71). Richard’s intent is to deceive Anne, use her for political advantage, and cast her aside. However, she is incapable of recognizing the extent of his villainy.

Machiavelli’s instruction in Chapter eighteen bears greater depth than merely deception. In fact, Machiavelli notes that it is useful for a prince “to appear merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious, and to be so; but to remain with a spirit built so that, if you need not to be those things, you are able and know how to change to the contrary” (70). We see in Richard’s deception of Anne his successful attempt to appear merciful, humane, and honest. Perhaps even more sinister, however, are the several scenes in which Shakespeare depicts Richard deliberately attempting to appear religious in order to deceive those around him. In act 1, scene 3, after bickering with Queen Elizabeth and Queen Margaret, Richard delivers another soliloquy in which he tells the audience how he is deceiving them by using scripture. Richard proclaims, “But then I sigh and, with a piece of scripture, / Tell them that God bids us do good for evil” (1.3. 354-5). According to the editor’s note, Richard appeases the two queens by referencing the Gospel of Matthew (5.44) and Luke (6.27) which instructs all men to love their enemies. Richard follows that remark by bringing to light to his deception. He brags, “And thus I clothe my naked villainy / With odd old ends stol’n forth of Holy Writ, / And seem a saint when most I play the devil” (1.3.356-8).
The most dramatic instance of religious deception appears in act 3, scene 7. Having already orchestrated the murders of Clarence and his political rival, Lord Hastings, Richard has an opportunity to appeal to the people of London for their support of his potential Kingship. After initially struggling to find favor with the English people, Buckingham and Richard devise a plan to deceive the Mayor of the city, who has an influence over who will become the next King. They persuade him that Richard is a devoutly religious man greatly concerned with spirituality and prayer. As John Alvis notes, Richard’s “real ability to coerce extends little farther than his throne room, and to control even his capital city he must win the favor of the Lord Mayor” (114).

Buckingham arranges for the Mayor to come visit Richard and then tells Richard, “And look you get a prayer book in your hand, / And stand between two churchmen, good my lord, / For on that ground I’ll make a holy descant” (3.7.46-50). Buckingham instructs Richard to go get a prayer book, stand between two priests, and when the Mayor arrives, Buckingham will speak to Richard’s religious virtue. In fact, when the Mayor arrives to meet with Richard, Catesby (one of Richard’s yes-men) tells him “He is within, with two right reverend fathers, / Divinely bent to meditation, / And in no worldly suits would he be moved to draw him from his holy exercise” (3.7.62-5). Furthermore, Buckingham uses the opportunity to speak to the Mayor and the gathered citizens about Richard’s purity:

Ah ha, my lord, this prince is not an Edward!
He is not telling on lewd-love bed,
But on his knees at meditation;
Not dallying with a brace of courtesans,
But meditating with two deep divines;
Not sleeping, to engross his idle body,
But praying, to enrich his watchful soul.
Happy were England would this virtuous prince
Take on his Grace the sovereignty thereof  
But sure I fear we shall not win him to it (3.7.72-81).

Richard eventually emerges from his chambers with two Bishops and a prayer book in hand—“Two props of virtue for a Christian prince,” Buckingham tells the Mayor (3.7.97). The word “props” here, of course, has a double meaning. The Bishops are “propping” Richard up in the eyes of the public, but also, they are literally staged props—fake, presenting Richard as something he is not. Buckingham then makes a long, eloquent speech in which he praises Richard’s Christian morality and virtue. Buckingham then, by design, suggests (with no protest from the Mayor) that Richard ought to become the next King of England. Richard, of course, plays “the maid’s part” and refuses the offer of the thrown, thereby appearing humble while simultaneously becoming the unattainable commodity that the people desire. Buckingham then performs another long speech urging Richard to take the thrown, after which the Mayor says “Do, good my lord, Your citizens entreat you” (3.7.203). Having deceived the Mayor and the people by appearing religious and humble, Richard eventually yields to popular demand and accepts the invitation to become England’s next King. According to Sandra Bonetta, “the superficial Christian attitude [is] adopted by Richard in order to conceal his true nature as a means to achieve an end—the crown and public approval” (521). Of course, the scene ends with Richard retreating from the people with the Bishops so that he could return to his “holy work” (3.7.248).

Act 3, scene 7 marks the height of Richard’s Machiavellian duplicity and the realization of his ultimate ambition—to become King of England. And though Richard’s achievement is rooted in and fulfilled by deceit, he now appears to the masses to be a merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious man. As this scene makes clear, it is
most important is to appear religious. Had he not convinced the Mayor and the people of London that he was a devout Christian, he would not have been offered the throne. In Chapter eighteen of his work Machiavelli makes a similar observation: “[The prince] should appear all mercy, all faith, all honesty, all humanity, all religion. And nothing is more important than this last quality. Men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands, because seeing is given to everyone, touching a few. Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are” (71). Because people have been willing to see how Richard appears, and unable to touch what he really is, he ascends to the throne of England.

While Richard certainly has other qualities that characterize his Machiavellian nature, the two chief qualities are his manipulation of fortune and his ability to deceive those around him. However, as acts 4 and 5 of *Richard III* demonstrate, once Richard achieved his desired Kingdom, he was not able to hold the crown and he was eventually defeated by Edmund. Though in his rise to power Richard seems to be a successful Machiavellian, the final two acts of the play demonstrate his shortcomings and the inconsistency of Shakespeare’s character with successful Machiavellian rule.
Chapter III—Richard’s Inadequacy as a Machiavellian Ruler

In the first three acts of the play we see the rise of Richard. He enters the stage in the first scene an ambitious, evil, dissembler—Richard Duke of Gloucester—and by the final scene of act III he has achieved the crown of England. As previously discussed, Richard’s rise to the throne was achieved in great part because he employed Machiavellian tactics. He capitalized on the fortune of the times and rose to power using deception and cruel measures. However, a closer look at Richard’s behavior throughout the play, and particularly in the final two acts, reveals a leader who actually departs from Machiavelli’s teaching in several key areas and ultimately suffers the consequences of losing his power.

First, Richard demonstrates a misunderstanding of Machiavelli’s teaching from Chapter eight of The Prince, which provides instruction on how to employ cruelty. Machiavelli admits that sometimes rulers must use cruelty; however, he notes that there are two forms of cruelty—cruelties badly used and cruelties well used. In the first section of this chapter I provide examples that show how Richard’s cruelties are badly used because they accumulate with time and do not benefit the people of England. While Machiavelli does praise a few tyrants whose egregious cruelty does not benefit the people, this chapter will point out that Richard lacks the virtue of the tyrants Machiavelli commends and therefore Richard loses support of his people.

In the second part of this chapter I argue that Richard’s ultimate downfall as a successful Machiavellian prince is his conscience. Machiavelli gives no attention to conscience throughout his work, leaving the reader to assume that a successful prince will operate with little regard to his moral standing in the afterlife. The power of human conscience, however, is on display on many occasions throughout Richard III. Several of
the characters, particular those ordering and unleashing murder, experience moral hesitation and demonstrate concern for their conscience. The most dramatic and important instance of conscience in the play is in act V when Richard is haunted in his sleep by the ghosts of the men and women he has killed. This dramatic emphasis on conscience throughout the play demonstrates the most important disparity between Richard’s character and Machiavellian thought.

Richard’s use of cruelty

Machiavelli notes in Chapter eighteen of The Prince that a ruler should try to do good “but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity” (70). The ambiguity of this advice lies in the word necessity. Machiavelli leaves it to the reader, and ultimately the prince, to interpret what constitutes a necessary evil. As the play unfolds, especially in the final acts, Richard employs evil measures in rapid succession. He orders the murder of many people in the royal court of England who he views as political rivals or threats to the security of his throne. However, Richard’s behavior demonstrates an inconsistency with the instruction Machiavellian offers princes in The Prince.

Machiavelli devotes chapter eight to “Those Who Have Attained a Principality through Crimes” (34). In the introduction of the chapter Machiavelli notes that some rulers “ascend to a principality by some criminal and nefarious path” (34). Given what we have already examined in Shakespeare’s Richard, Machiavelli’s teaching in this chapter is quite relevant. Machiavelli discusses cruelties badly used and those cruelties well used. He writes, “Those can be called well used (if it is permissible to speak well of evil) that are done at a stroke, out of necessity to secure oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can. Those cruelties
are badly used which, though few in the beginning, rather grow with time than are eliminated” (38). Despite the reputation he had acquired in Early Modern England, Machiavelli does not outright endorse the use of indiscriminate violence. Rather, he notes that in some instances it becomes necessary for a prince to secure himself and claims that in such cases cruelties should be carried out swiftly, all at once, and if possible, in the best interest of the public. Further, Machiavelli writes, “injuries must be done all together, so that, being tasted less, they offend less” (38). If a ruler allows his cruel offenses to enumerate over time, Machiavelli argues, he will very likely lose favor with his people.

Going forth, it is important to note that Machiavelli amends his teaching on cruelty in Chapters XVII and XIX of The Prince. Machiavelli first qualifies his teaching on cruelty in chapter XVII. He notes that inhuman cruelty is required when leading an army. He writes, “But when the prince is with his armies and has a multitude of soldiers under his government, then it is above all necessary not to care about a name for cruelty, because without this name he never holds his army united, or disposed to any action” (67). Machiavelli argues that cruelty is essential in maintaining a loyal and efficient army. Machiavelli offers the example of Hannibal, who used “inhuman cruelty which, together with his infinite virtues, always made him venerable and terrible in the sight of his soldiers” (67). Though feared, Hannibal was not hated—an important mark of Machiavellian virtue.

Furthermore, in Chapter 19, Machiavelli discusses the modes of “Avoiding Contempt and Hatred.” In his discussion he offers the example of Septimius Severus, a “very cruel and very rapacious” man who became the Roman Emperor through
manipulation and murder. Severus first murdered Emperor Julianus in Rome, then murdered Pescennius Niger, the head of the Asian armies, and then deceived and murdered Albinus in France. While swift, Severus’ cruelties enumerated in a similar fashion to Richard’s. However, rather than condemn Severus, Machiavelli presents him as a virtuous, successful leader. While Machiavelli’s praise appears to be in tension with his instructions on how to use cruelty, he praises Severus’ ability to avoid hatred. Machiavelli writes that “In Severus was so much virtue that, by keeping the soldiers his friends, although the people were overburdened by him, he was always able to rule happily because his virtues made him so admirable in the sight of soldiers and the people that the [people] remained somehow astonished and stupefied” (78). Severus was able to maintain the loyalty and trust of the army and therefore while the citizens may have feared him they did not hate him. Severus’ cruelty did not benefit the people, but he kept them in awe and avoided their disdain. As the following examination suggests, Richard was unable to avoid the hatred of his people and therefore his cruelty would not be condoned by Machiavelli.

In evaluating the manner in which Richard employs cruelty it is worth chronicling the several murders he orchestrates in order to maintain his state. The first casualty of Richard’s ambition to ascend the throne is his brother Clarence, who is murdered in act 1 scene IV. As previously discussed, Richard deceives both of his brothers which leads to Clarence’s imprisonment in the tower. Furthermore, in act 2 scene 1, Richard delivers the news to the ailing King Edward that Clarence has been executed in the tower. Though Edward had sent a letter pardoning Clarence, it was intercepted by Richard who hired the murderers. Richard then tells the King, his brother, “But [Clarence], poor man, by your
first order died” (2.1.90). King Edward is deeply afflicted by his presumed culpability. His condition worsens and in act 2 scene 3 we learn from two citizens that “the King is dead” (2.3.4). While Richard did not murder Edward, he certainly encouraged and expedited the King’s death. Knowing that the news of Clarence’s murder would further cripple his brother, Richard deceived the King into taking responsibility.

With both of his brothers dead and himself on the verge of becoming King, Richard becomes concerned about loyalties within the royal court. In act 3 scene 4 Richard calls a meeting to assess Hastings’ loyalty. Upon discovering that Hastings is loyal to the young Princes rather than to himself, Richard declares, “Thou art a traitor.—/ Off with his head . . . The rest that love me, rise and follow me” (3.4.76-80). Before even becoming King, Richard orders the murder of several obstacles to his power including Clarence, Hastings, and also Rivers, Gray and Vaughn (three minor characters, allied to Queen Elizabeth, ordered to death in act 3, scene 3). By the end of act 3, before Richard has taken the throne, he has eliminated six men, including both of his brothers.

Far from being a cruel blow delivered all at once, Richard’s acts are persisting and growing with time in direct contrast to Machiavelli’s instructions. As he persists his actions turn even grislier, even though he is anointed King of England. In act 4 scene 2, Richard orders the most disturbing murders of the play—the two young Princes (sons of Edward) who, though young, are the rightful heirs to the throne. Fearing that the older of the Princes, Edward, could be named King of England, Richard gives Buckingham explicit orders: “O bitter consequence / That Edward still should live “true noble prince”! / Cousin, though wast not wont to be so dull. / Shall I be plain? I wish the bastards dead. / And I would have it suddenly performed” (4.2.17-21). Buckingham hesitates at Richard’s
command, presumably haunted by his conscience, and therefore Richard enlists James Tyrrel to carry out the bloody murders. Tyrrel returns to Richard at the beginning of act IV scene III proclaiming “The tyrannous and bloody act is done, / The most arch deed of piteous massacre / That ever yet this land was guilty of” (4.3.1-3). Even Tyrrel, a proven criminal himself, recognizes Richard’s overwhelming cruelty. After congratulating Tyrrel for his act of loyalty, Richard offers a short soliloquy documenting his bloody endeavors and his forecasting his next steps:

The son of Clarence have I pent up close,
His daughter meanly have I matched in marriage
The sons of Edward sleep in Abraham’s bosom
And Anne my wife hath bid this world goodnight.
Now, for I know the Breton Richmond aims
At young Elizabeth, my brother’s daughter
And by that knot looks proudly on the crown
To her go I, a jolly thriving wooer (4.3.40-47)

Richard notes that the murdered princes ‘sleep’ and that Clarence’s son has been locked up on suspicion. Furthermore, Richard has arranged the marriage of Clarence’s daughter to an ignoble man, and reveals that “Anne, [his] wife hath bid this world goodnight” (4.3.43). While Shakespeare gives little attention to Anne’s murder, it is worth noting that by the end of act IV Richard has added three more corpses to the steadily growing pile—his nephews the two young princes and his own wife.

Machiavelli notes that “in taking hold of a state, he who seizes it should review all the offenses necessary for him to commit, and do them all at a stroke, so as not to have to renew them every day and, by not renewing them, to secure men and gain them to himself with benefits” (38). One of Richard’s main failures as a Machiavellian prince is that he commits cruelties over time, letting each offense accumulate. In doing so, he set men against him. He is unable to ‘secure men and gain them to himself.’ Richard is
paranoid and kills all men of whom he is suspicious. By the end of act IV we learn that a large military force, led by Richmond, is preparing to wage war against Richard. Even Buckingham, Richard’s one-time ally, is set against him. Ratcliffe enters in act IV, scene 4 declaring:

Most mighty Sovereign, on the western coast,  
Rideth a puissant navy. To our shores  
Throng many doubtful hollow-hearted friends,  
Unarmed and unresolved to beat them back.  
Tis thought that Richmond is their admiral;  
And there they hull, expecting but the aid of Buckingham to welcome them ashore. (4.4.456-462).

The news from Ratcliffe signals one of Richard’s deficiencies according to Machiavellian framework. In persisting in his cruelties, Richard became hated by his people. He failed to turn them into any ‘utility for his subjects,’ and he lost the support of the public. Therefore, as Richmond sails to wage war, Richard has only enemies and ‘hollow-hearted friends,’ unresolved to come to his aid. Furthermore, Buckingham, Richard’s confidant for much of the play, worried for his own life, betrays Richard in fear and offers aid to the enemy force.

Richard employs cruelty beginning in the first act of the play, violence that follows upon his killing of King Henry VI in the previous play. So insecure is his nature and so tenuous his claim to the throne that he deems it necessary to keep killing people, even his own wife, to protect his hold on power. As a result, Richard has very few allies as he prepares for battle in the final act of the play. Machiavelli notes in Chapter 17 of *The Prince* that “[the prince] should proceed in a temperate mode with prudence and humanity so that too much confidence does not make him incautious and too much diffidence does not render him intolerable” (66). In Richard’s case, too much confidence
(and arguably a corrupted nature) leads him to be incautious. He slays his own people with little regard to public opinion and winds up under siege. According to Conny Loder, “Though Machiavelli requests a ruler to be consciously aware of the binary good-bad opposition . . . Richard’s commitment to do evil has little in common with Machiavelli’s virtue. The character Richard is a distortion of Machiavelli’s doctrine, which presents the Machiavel as someone who is committed to evil out of mere selfishness” (73). Richard employs cruelty selfishly, and prolifically out of an apparent commitment to evil rather than any desire to increase public good.

Furthermore, Machiavelli makes an interesting note as he discusses the manner in which princes should use cruelty. He notes that those princes who use cruelty well “can have some remedy for their state with God and with men” (38). He argues that while a ruler should not enter into evil whenever possible, if he has to do so, he should use cruelty well so that he can have some moral integrity in the eyes of God. As the next part of this chapter illuminates, Richard (and many other butchers in the play) are haunted by conscience. Machiavelli’s teaching in chapter eight seems to forecast Richard’s moral turmoil in act V. Machiavelli further argues that for those who do not use cruelty well “it is impossible for them to maintain themselves” (38). Interestingly Machiavelli uses a personal pronoun, *themselves*, rather than saying it is impossible for them to maintain their state. Machiavelli suggests that unnecessarily malicious rulers may be undone by their conscience. Due to his excessive cruelty, Richard’s conscience makes it ‘impossible to maintain himself.’

*Part II: Richard’s Conscience*
As already noted, Machiavelli gives no attention to conscience in *The Prince*. As Jack D’Amico notes, “Conscience, that curb on self-interest occasioned by the fear of an accounting before or after death is conspicuous by its absence in Machiavelli’s work. He does not concern himself with the internal repercussions of those shocking acts a man of virtue must often commit” (31). The world of *Richard III*, however, displays as much conscience as it does treachery. Richard Heilman notes that “Shakespeare makes a key word out of ‘conscience,’ which, by an irony of the creative process is used more frequently in *Richard III* than in any other play except *Henry VIII*” (70-1) While *Richard III* presents us with Shakespeare’s most explicitly Machiavellian character, the play seems to make as much a case for the power of human conscience as it does for the power of Machiavellian rule and builds to its climax by placing the two in dramatic tension. The most dramatic and important depiction of conscience in this play concerns its central character, King Richard. While conscience appears in the play from its outset, the first public example is in Queen Margaret’s cursing Richard. Margaret reminds the audience of Richard’s crimes committed before the play begins. Furiously she exclaims, “I do remember them too well: / Thou killed’st my husband Henry in the Tower, / And Edward my poor son, at Tewkesbury” (1.3.122-24). After bickering with Richard for a short while Margaret curses him:

If heaven have any grievous plague in store 
Exceeding those that I can wish upon thee, 
O, let them keep it till thy sins be ripe 
And then hurl down their indignation 
On thee, the troubler of the poor world’s peace. 
The worm of conscience still begnaw they soul. (1.3.228-33).
With Margaret’s curse the word conscience appears in the play for the first time. She recognizes Richard’s unremitting cruel nature and wishes upon him a soul afflicted by conscience. In the context of the curse, Shakespeare asserts what Machiavelli ignores—the power of conscience. Margaret’s curses come to fruition in act V of the play when Richard is troubled in his sleep the night before battle.

However, before further treating Richard’s famously haunted conscience it is enlightening to first consider the several other instances in which characters (most of whom are employed on Richard’s behalf) are plagued by their consciences, for it is a phenomenon that Shakespeare treats throughout the play. The second prominent instance of conscience in Richard III appears in the first act of the play, scene 4, when the two murderers hired by Richard go to the tower to kill Clarence. When the two murderers arrive in the tower, one expresses concern about his soul to the other:

Second Murderer: Why, he shall never wake until the great Judgment Day.
First Murderer: Why then, he’ll say we stabbed him sleeping.
Second Murderer: The urging of that word “judgment” hath bred a kind of remorse in me.
First Murderer: What, art thou afraid?
Second Murderer: Not to kill him, having a warrant, but to be damned for killing him, from the which no warrant can defend me.
First Murderer: I thought thou hadst been resolute.
Second Murderer: So I am—to let him live (1.4.107-18).

Hearing the Second Murderer’s hesitation, the First Murderer reminds him of their reward, leading to the following exchange:

Second Murderer: (Zounds,) he dies! I had forgot the reward
First Murderer: O, where’s thy conscience now?
First Murderer: When he opens his purse to give us our reward, thy conscience flies out (1.4.129-35).
When asked what will happen if his conscience comes back, the Second Murderer offers the following reflection:

I’ll not meddle with [conscience]. It makes a man a coward: a man cannot steal but it accuseth him; a man cannot swear but it checks him, a man cannot lie with his neighbor’s wife but it detects him. ‘Tis a blushing, shamefaced spirit that mutinies in a man’s bosom. It fills a man full of obstacles. It made me once restore a purse of gold that by chance I found. It beggars any man that keeps it. It is turned out of towns and cities for a dangerous thing, and every man that means to live well endeavors to trust to himself and live without it. (1.4.139-50).

The Second Murderer draws attention to the relationship between cruelty and conscience. He observes that a man afflicted by conscience cannot live well leading a life of crime. Therefore, the Second Murderer instructs the audience that if one is going to be a criminal, it is best to live without conscience. The absence of conscience in Machiavelli’s work seems to suggest a similar notion—a ruler prompted by “necessity” to employ cruel tactics ought to suppress his conscience or, as the murderer says, live without it. As we will see, Richard, though he would seem to proceed in the very manner this murderer recommends, is ultimately unable to heed the practical advice of his hired hand beneath the weight of his accumulated cruelties.

In act 4, scene 2, though Richard has already ascended to the throne, he notes in an aside that his cruelties continue to stack up. Richard coolly reflects, “I am so far in blood that sin will pluck on sin” (4.2.67). His speech here seems to dismiss the necessity of his murders and suggests that that one cruelty inevitably leads to another—a reflection out of line with Machiavelli’s aforementioned instructions. However, he also seems to dismiss his conscience in the very next line, proclaiming “Tear-falling pity dwells not in
this eye” (4.2.68). Richard makes a deliberate attempt here to dismiss the moral repercussions of his crimes. This is the last point in the play at which Richard is able to successful repress pity and conscience.

Conscience emerges again in act IV after Richard declares to his partner in cruelties and chief political actor that he “wishes the bastards dead” (4.2.20). Buckingham, who up until that moment has gone along with and helped facilitate Richard’s “necessary” deeds to acquire the throne, answering all of Richard’s demands steadfastly, suddenly hesitates, imploring Richard, “Give me some little breath, some pause, dear lord, / Before I positively speak in this. / I will resolve you herein presently” (4.2.26-8). Why is Buckingham, who has not yet paused in bringing about the unjust killings of Clarence, Hastings and the others, troubled by the prospect of murdering the two young princes? It is the first conversation we witness between the two men after Richard is seated upon the throne and it seems that Buckingham might therefore question the necessity of the proposed deed as well as its political ramifications among the people. However, it also seems possible that we are witnessing Buckingham’s conscience awaken. Perhaps he has reached his moral limit at the prospect of murdering children. Since his “little breath” to consider the matter is his undoing with Richard and we never hear the resolution to which his considering brings him, we cannot know exactly why Buckingham hesitated, but it would seem that conscience, not just political pragmatism, played a part and that he was at least momentarily less willing than Richard to march forward into yet more cruelty. But where the exercise of cruelty is concerned, there never seems to be willing participants. James Tyrrel, the thug Richard hires in place of Buckingham accepts the charge to accomplish the bloody deed. Interestingly, however,
even Tyrrel, a man experienced at the trade of killing, sees this job as an occasion for outsourcing. He hires two men, Dighton and Forrest, to accomplish this job. Afterwards, in a brief stand-alone scene of only 23 lines, Tyrrel speaks directly to the audience, describing how the two men he hired, like the Second Murderer from act I, became hesitant to commit the crime, afflicted by their consciences:

Dighton and Forrest, who I did suborn
To do this piece of ruthless butchery,
Albeit they were fleshed villains, bloody dogs,
Melted with tenderness and mild compassion
Wept like two children in their deaths’ sad story
“O thus,” quoth Dighton, “lay they gentle babes.”
“Thus, thus,” quoth Forrest, “girdling one another
Within their alabaster innocent arms.
Their lips were four red roses on a stalk,
And in their summer beauty kissed each other.
A book of prayers on their pillow lay,
Which once,” quoth Forrest, “almost changed my mind.
But, O, the devil—” There the villain stopped;
When Dighton thus told on: “We smothered
The most replenished sweet work of nature
That from the prime creation e’er she framed.”
Hence both are gone with conscience and remorse;
They could not speak; so I left them both
To bear this tidings to the bloody king (4.3.1-23).

It is worth noting that for all the emotional and moral anguish that their consciences cause them, like the Second murderer, it did not dissuade them to change course. They accomplish the murders apparently with diabolical encouragement—“O, the devil” being the last words of their report. The moral hesitation expressed by Forrest and Dighton serves not only as another instance of conscience’s power, but it also foreshadows the climactic and dramatic depiction of conscience in act V when Richard himself is finally confronted by the victims of his prolific cruelty.
On the eve of the battle between Richmond’s and Richard’s armies, both leaders fall asleep in their respective tents and are visited by the ghosts of Prince Edward, Henry the Sixth, Clarence, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, the young Princes, Hastings, Lady Anne, and Buckingham—everyone whom Richard has killed or whose murders he has commanded. Each ghost visits Richmond and wishes him good luck in battle, encouraging him, assuring him that the spirits of all those who Richard has slain are allied against the murderer. However, the same spirits that encourage Richmond haunt Richard. Each ghost deplores him for his evils and damning him in battle. It is in this scene that Richard is undone by his conscience. He wakes from his sleep, and delivers a frantic, halting soliloquy in which he recalls his evils, reveals his anguish and fear, and curses his conscience:

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!
The lights burn blue; it is now dead midnight.
Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
Richard loves Richard, that is, I [am] I.
Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
Then fly! What, from myself, Great reason why:
Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
That I myself have done unto myself?
O, no. Alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself.
I am a villain. Yet I lie; I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree;
Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree.
All several sins, all used in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all “Guilty, guilty!”
I shall despair. There is no creature loves me,
And if I die, no soul will pity me. (5.3.191-213).
Rather than attribute the ghostly visitations to supernatural forces, Richard blames his coward conscience. Furthermore, in this scene Richard proves an unsuccessful Machiavellian ruler. As Machiavelli notes in Chapter eight of *The Prince*, when cruelties grow over time that ruler will have very little “remedy with God and with men” (38). It is in his nightmare that Richard experiences fulfilment of the Machiavellian warning. Richard confesses his “hateful deeds” and acknowledges he is guilty of perjury and murder—citing his conscience as the factor that led him to this cowardly moment. However, most in line with Machiavelli’s teaching is Richard’s observation that “There is no creature loves me / And if I die, no soul will pity me.” Because Richard finds pity from neither God nor Man, he is unable to maintain himself and is haunted by his very troubled conscience.

Like the Second Murderer in act 1 and like Dighton and Forrest, Richard is plagued mightily by his conscience, and like them he forges ahead despite the pangs, and suppresses his coward conscience to accomplish what he perceives to be necessary. Unsettled by his dreams and crippled by his conscience, Richard still resolves to fight Richmond. He echoes the Second Murderers teaching on conscience as he commands his soldiers into battle:

```
Go, gentlemen, every man unto his charge.
Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls.
Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
Devised at first to keep the strong in awe.
Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law.
March on. Join bravely. Let us to it pell mell,
If not to heaven, then hand and hand to hell (V.III.325-31).
```

Richard’s speech here may endear him to his men as a brave soldier, immune to the afflictions of conscience. However, what we learn from the soliloquy following his
nightmares is that he is in fact troubled deeply by the crimes he committed in his quest to hold power. As Alexander Leggatt argues, “His defiance of conscience in his oration to his soldiers may be a flash of the old Richard, but it contradicts what we have seen of his private feelings and leaves us not quite convinced” (40). His rhetoric before battle is but another deception. He tells his men that “Conscience is but a word that cowards use,” when only a few hours prior he woke in the night proclaiming “O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!” This contradiction is importance in understanding Richard’s desire to appear one way but behave the other. In his private utterance he admits that he is afflicted by his conscience, but he dismisses this notion in the public rhetorical act of the rallying speech. In private he is unfiltered and honest, but in public is deceptive. The implication in Richard’s contradiction is that he is indeed a coward—which leads to his defeat in the battle against Richmond. As Hughes Daniels’ points out, “Although Richard, denies the validity of conscience, he dies somewhat more aware of his own troubled conscience than he was when he set out upon his treacherous course” (851). Furthermore, Sandra Bonnetta argues, “in Richard III, the association between conscience and cowardice is repeatedly emphasized and may even constitute one of the main themes of the play” (512).

A Machiavellian prince cannot maintain his state in cowardice, and therefore to a degree he must be immune to conscience. As Jack D’Amico points out, “For Machiavelli, the man of virtue can both overcome and use what other men fear. Extraordinary acts of violence expose common men to the disorder they fear most deeply while preparing them for the benefits and the responsibilities of citizenship” (35). As D’Amico notes, a Machiavellian prince who employs cruelty well, should not be haunted by conscience.
Ultimately, Richard fails to fit Machiavellian framework on two fronts: First, Richard does not employ cruelty well. Richard’s cruelties accumulate, he displays a commitment to do evil, and he uses cruelty with little regard to the welfare and opinion of his subjects and therefore is hated by his people. Second, Richard vows to prove a villain, but because he is too much a coward, his conscience impedes his ability to maintain his state without feeling deep remorse for his many cruelties. Machiavelli points out that in some cases extreme cruelty is required of a prince. However, a prince who is extremely cruel must maintain the favor of his people and cannot succumb to the power of his conscience—Richard fails on both fronts. Therefore Richard’s use of cruelty, compounded by his troubled conscience, prevents him from being a successful Machiavellian prince.
Conclusion—Shakespeare’s Comment on Machiavellian Practicality

Richard is the most obvious Machiavellian figure that Shakespeare puts on stage. While Shakespeare crafted his character from historical sources, it seems clear that Richard’s character was fashioned with Machiavelli’s teachings in mind. Once Richard Duke of Gloucester aligns himself with Machiavelli in Henry VI Part III, Shakespeare’s audience can expect a Machiavellian villain to take the stage in his next play, Richard III. As this thesis notes, early in the play Richard appears to audiences as a blatant Machiavellian figure—determined to deceive and do evil in order to achieve and maintain the throne of England. However, a closer examination of Richard’s downfall demonstrates the various ways in which he is an inept Machiavellian, incapable of maintaining his state. Given this, it seems quite probable that Shakespeare intended Richard III to interrogate and critique Machiavellian ideas—especially those that may have been circulating during his day.

By crafting a character so obviously associated with Machiavelli’s teachings, Shakespeare draws attention to Machiavelli’s reputation. However, in the failure of Richard as a prince, Shakespeare’s play serves as a comment on Machiavellianism. Richard fails to maintain favor with the people of England and thus fails to adhere to Machiavelli’s instructions. Even more significant is the emergence of his conscience which marks the key departure from Machiavellian thought. As noted above, conscience does not appear in Machiavelli’s The Prince. The absence of conscience in this work suggests that a successful Machiavellian prince must function with little regard to his soul and his standing in the afterlife. If a ruler is to be cruel by necessity, he must dismiss his conscience or dismiss the existence of conscience.
Significantly, *The Prince* offers no successful examples of Christian leaders. Machiavelli offers a litany of failed Christian leaders including Cesare Borgia and Ferdinand. The only successful examples Machiavelli offers are pre-Christian rulers like Severus, Romulus, and Moses—all of whom employ cruelty without regard to conscience. The absence of successful Christian leadership in *The Prince* would seem to coincide with the action of Shakespeare’s Richard III and several of his other plays. If a leader cannot employ cruelty well and dismiss his conscience, he cannot succeed as a Machiavellian prince. The dismissal of one’s conscience is a decidedly heretical act. Shakespeare offers characters like Lord and Lady Macbeth and King Claudius that suggest a similar pattern. Evil deeds are not a sustainable foundation on which to maintain a kingdom because conscience will inevitably undo the leader.

It was by appearing Christian that Shakespeare’s Richard was able to rise to throne. It was the affliction of his Christian conscience that undid him. In an action consistent with Shakespeare’s narrative, the historical King Richard was given a Christian burial in Leicester this year—an act which at once affirms his predicament as a man with a Christian conscience and soul, simultaneously affirming his failure as a Machiavellian prince.
References:


Hall, Edward. *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*.


