

Classical Poetry and Modern Political Philosophy: Spenser and Machiavelli in *A View of the State of Ireland*

Dennis Wise

Deans' Distinguished Essay Award recipient

Abstract

*The sixteenth-century English poet Edmund Spenser has long seemed full of contradictions. On one hand, Spenser is a poet of “twelve priuate morall vertues,” falling into the civic-humanist tradition advocated by his predecessor Sir Philip Sidney. On the other hand, Spenser’s *A View of the State of Ireland* advocates a brutal and bloody colonial policy in relation to the Irish, views that seem incompatible with a master of moral poetry. I suggest that we understand the apparent contradiction as a conflict between Spenser’s classicism and his apparent acceptance of modern political philosophy, initiated by Niccolò Machiavelli. According to Leo Strauss, Machiavelli was an “esoteric” writer, someone who did not openly proclaim his doctrines of realpolitik. Machiavelli’s method broke with classical political philosophy, which—like the classical literature championed by Sidney—often taught moral or imaginary ideals as a guide to action. I argue that Spenser read Machiavelli well, understanding those chapters of *The Prince* most closely pertaining to Spenser’s own colonial situation in Ireland, and wrote *A View* according to those views. Spenser’s personal experience as a colonial administrator led him (following Machiavelli) to break decisively with classical political philosophy, even while Spenser’s literary theory refused to diverge from Sidney. In other words, Spenser is ancient in his art and modern in his politics. Rather than being simply a poet of the “State” or of nascent English nationalism, Spenser actually understands and encompasses the contradictions and changes of his own historical moment.*

In “A Letter of the Authors,” annexed to the 1590 *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser makes an interesting remark concerning the nature of the ideal. In defending his poetic practice, he contrasts Xenophon with Plato. According to Spenser, Plato had, “in the exquisite depth of his judgment, formed a Commune welth such as it should be,” whereas Xenophon—writing about the (allegedly) perfect ruler in the *Cyropaedia*—“fashioned a gouvernement such as might best be” (15). What fascinates Spenser about Xenophon is how Xenophon portrays his ideal ruler in terms of human figures and examples rather than through a series of doctrines, precepts, or rules. To put the matter in another way, talking about the “twelue priuate morall vertues” (16) in treatise form might have certain uses, Spenser believes, but it lacks the pure value of *demonstrating* those virtues as incarnated by exemplary figures. *The Faerie Queene* constitutes Spenser’s own contemporary attempt to demonstrate virtue incarnated. No mere treatise, risking dullness and pedantry, should hope to convey the loveliness of virtue as powerfully as masterfully-wrought poetry.¹

What makes “A Letter of the Authors” remarkable, though, is not just that Spenser values Xenophon more highly than later centuries typically did.² Rather, it is that Spenser explicitly likens his poetic King Arthur to Xenophon’s Cyrus the Great. Thus Spenser follows in the footsteps not only of Xenophon but also of Vergil with Aeneas, Ariosto with Orlando, and Tasso with Rinaldo and Godfredo, and Homer with Agamemnon and Ulysses. Poetry—as a genre—enjoys a higher spot on the pedestal than either philosophy or history. Philosophy, on Spenser’s view, is the genre of rules and abstractions, exemplified by Plato’s *Republic*, and the historical shackles of historiography prevents historiography from attaining the freedom and power that poetry acquires easily.

Yet, beneath Spenser’s advocacy of poetry, lies a problem. He claims that poetry—the highest genre—concretely represents the virtues, but Spenser offered only silence on what poetry of his sort *cannot* do, that is, discourse well on the realm of practical

1 Spenser’s debt to *An Apology for Poetry* and Sir Philip Sidney (to whom he dedicated *The Shepheardes Calendars*) is clear. Sidney had defended poetry by arguing that it combined the precepts of historians with the moral focus of philosophers—arguing, in effect, that poetry surpasses both history and moral philosophy. Especially in terms of teaching morality, Sidney greatly prefers poets. “For, indeed, if the question were whether it were better to have a particular act truly or falsely set down, there is no doubt which is to be chosen, no more than whether you had rather have Vespasian’s picture right as he was, or, at the painter’s pleasure, nothing resembling. But if the question be for your own use and learning, whether it be better to have it set down as it should be or as it was, then certainly is more doctrinable the feigned Cyrus in Xenophon than the true Cyrus in Justin” (337-8). Because Sidney conceives the Greek writer Xenophon as an exemplary teacher of virtue, he categorized Xenophon as the “most excellent poets that never versified” (333). Niccolò Machiavelli’s task was to shatter the respect of potential rulers for those feigned Cyruses which they learned from men like Sidney; my argument will be that Spenser accepted that shattering for his political writings in terms of his practical politics, but that he kept those politics strictly separate from his poetical writings. By implication, although I will not have time to explore the point in great depth, I suggest that even the fifth book of *The Faerie Queene* owes its theoretical allegiance to Sidney rather than to Machiavelli.

2 To take one example out of many, the translator of one of Xenophon’s Penguin editions says quite easily that those “ages and people who dislike moral earnestness will not find Xenophon attractive.” Moral earnestness is all that Xenophon has, apparently, since “[c]ertainly, he is not an original thinker or writer” (Waterfield 8). In such works as *On Tyranny and Xenophon’s Socrates*, however, the political philosopher Leo Strauss has done much to revive Xenophon’s modern reputation.

politics. In *A View on the State of Ireland*, Spenser seems to argue for a harsh—even brutal—colonial policy towards Ireland. The dialogue’s main speaker, Irenius, proposes a number of solutions: permanent garrisons, forced relocations, despoliation of land. That despoliation would lead to famine, leading in turn to wide-scale starvation and death and thereby “solving” the so-called Irish problem. The policy aids and abets the brutal use of executive power against indigenous peoples, whose purpose is the maintenance of colonial rule and the increase of wealth and power for the English nation.

Tracing Spenser’s intellectual history, as Andrew Hadfield notes, is a tricky business. Hadfield himself suggests that Spenser’s Irish policy shares some correspondences with Jean Bodin. Bodin “took issue with Machiavelli’s contention that a republic was the most lasting form of government, alleging that despotism was in fact more durable because subjects could be controlled more easily and were unable to resist as free men were” (10). Yet Hadfield is careful to say that he notes only a correspondence, not necessarily a direct connection. For my part, I believe that, while a comparison with Bodin may be fruitful, a comparison with Niccolò Machiavelli can be more fruitful still. For now let me suggest that Machiavelli—as the first truly modern political philosopher—is the theorist most aware of the possibilities and dangers of *realpolitik*. Besides Spenser’s own reference to *Discourses on Livy* at the end of *A View*, we know that Machiavelli was well-known during Spenser’s school years; Spenser’s friend Gabriel Harvey boasted “[y]ou can not stepp into a schollars studye but (ten to on) you shall litely finde open” a volume either by Bodin or Machiavelli (79). Spenser’s own familiarity seems assured.

But it seems impossible to reconcile the ideality of Spenser’s poetry and the dauntingly pragmatic approach of his politics. His poetry creates a knight of perfect virtue while Spenser’s political views effectively sneer at those virtues—for example, Elizabeth’s mercy—as mere obstacles for a puissant political practice. My argument is that this tension never becomes resolved within Spenser’s thought; not only that, this tension results in a continuous and *living* contradiction. By a “living” contradiction I mean that, rather than threatening the foundations of his views as a normal foundation contradiction might, *this* contradiction actually spares Spenser from falling into ineffective practice. The keystone of my argument is Xenophon—or, rather, Xenophon’s interpretation of Cyrus. Machiavelli, like Spenser and many others prior to the nineteenth century, also rated Xenophon higher than Plato. Yet Machiavelli realized (in a way that Spenser apparently did not³) that Xenophon’s Cyrus never actually existed. He was a literary figure romanticized and idealized by Xenophon. Machiavelli recognized that Cyrus acquired and kept his empire

3 For a contrary view, see Christopher Nadon. He views the *Cyropaedia* as a “drama” rather than a political treatise or a work of history, and he approvingly cites Spenser and Sidney for recognizing this fact (24). In his view, their belief that Xenophon is a “poet” seemingly equates to Xenophon’s “dramatic” qualities. Yet Nadon’s own insightful analysis of *Cyropaedia* requires the most exhaustive close and critical reading of the text—the same sort of reading required by Plato’s “dramas.” For my part, I see Spenser’s and Sidney’s art as strictly within the civic-humanist tradition. Their categorization of Xenophon as a poet indicates certain elements of ideality and moral virtue excluded by Nadon’s (and Machiavelli’s) reading of Xenophon’s text. In other words, the art of Spenser and Sidney seems entirely antithetical the political philosophy and hermeneutics of Machiavelli, who would not approve of *The Faerie Queene*.

via frauds; he could never have acquired his empire simply through those virtues ascribed to him by Xenophon: justness, benevolence, cool rationality, and a keen ambition nonetheless free from cruelty, vengefulness, and avarice.⁴ Yet where Spenser's poetry unproblematically accepts the "poetic" creation of Xenophon, Spenser's *political science* accepts Machiavelli and a Machiavellian interpretation of Xenophon—views irreconcilable with the poetic view. Spenser's own practical experience as a colonial administrator showed him the limitations of the Xenophonic ideal; that, along with his sense of nationalism, led him into a political modernity first articulated by Machiavelli, a man who shattered classical models of political philosophy and their "imaginary" Republics and Princedoms (Machiavelli 40), even while Spenser's artistic practice—based on *unshattered* classical models—created a separate intellectual sphere for his idealistic inclinations. Edmund Spenser stands astride the dividing point between the ancient world and modernity—a divide of which he seems blithely unaware. Yet it is this fundamental divide that leads Spenser, almost instinctively, to shy away from applying the moral virtues of *The Faerie Queene* to *A View on the State of Ireland*.

The second section of this paper examines the potentially greatest challenge to my view of Spenser as embodying a living intellectual contradiction—namely, that *A View* is not a work by Spenser at all. The third section aims to place Spenser more squarely within Machiavellian thought—emphasizing the distinctiveness of Machiavelli's views and ways of reading ancient authors like Xenophon. Additionally, many chapters of *The Prince* bear directly on Spenser's situation in Ireland, and I will suggest that we have good reasons for identifying Irenius quite closely with Spenser himself. My fourth section is a brief conclusion in which I suggest that little fruit is born from praising or censuring Spenser for his political views or his apparent contradictions (although from a modern perspective they certainly deserve censure). Ultimately, I recommend scholars consider Spenser in a pre-modern manner as much as possible, since only in such a way can we grasp how keenly attuned Spenser was to his revolutionary historical moment.

Spenser And The Authorship Of *A View*

Some debate exists on how closely we can identify Spenser with the main speaker of *A View of the State of Ireland*, Irenius. On one hand, we know that Spenser himself benefitted significantly from Irish colonialism, gaining the estate of Kilcolman in Cork County in 1589, earning the status of "gentleman." He served as secretary to Lord Arthur Grey, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, and therefore probably witnessed the massacre of a Spanish garrison at Smerwick in 1580. He seems to have been involved with the Munster plantation scheme, a plan that took confiscated lands arising from the Second Desmond

⁴ In Chapter XVIII, Machiavelli says that a ruler should seem to be "the embodiment of mercy, good faith, integrity, humanity, and religion" (47). The appearance of those virtues are more important than their reality, however. We must "understand that a Prince, and most of all a new Prince, cannot observe all those rules of conduct in respect whereof men are accounted good, being often forced, in order to preserve his Princedom, to act in opposition to good faith, charity, humanity, and religion" (46). Nobility and honor are honored by their breach.

Rebellion (1579-1583)—itself a protest against English interference in Munster Country—and resettled those lands among wealthy English colonists. On the other hand, none of these biographical details necessarily link Spenser to the draconian views promulgated by Irenius. Spenser himself apparently understood the horror of the famine Irenius advocates. One mere year of famine, for example, will—despite the richness of the land—bring the populace

to such wretchednesse, as that any stony heart would have rued the same. Out of every corner of the woods and glynnes they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legges could not beare them; they looked like anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eate the dead carrions, happy where they could finde them, yea, and one another soone after, insomuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves; and, if they found a plot of water-cresses or shamrocks, there they flocked as to a feast for the time, yet not able long to continue therewithall; that in short space there were none almost left, and a most populous and plentifull countrey suddainely left voyde of man and beast; yet sure in all that warre, there perished not many by the sword, but all by the extremitie of famine, which they themselves had wrought. (Spenser 101-2)

The crux of the argument separating Spenser from Irenius seems to be an overwhelming doubt that someone with his humanist education and poetical genius could sincerely espouse such horrors. To induce wide scale famine such as Irenius proposes—and suddenly to absolve the English from responsibility by saying that the Irish “themselves had wrought” it—seems monstrous and beyond belief. Irenius, so the argument might run, is an unreliable narrator, along the lines of Sir Raphael Hythloday in Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*.

That Hythloday does not equal More is clear, even beyond the fact that he seems to advocate positions that More himself argues against in different writings.⁵ Many of the names within *Utopia* are jokes set to distance the reader from its views. “Utopia” means both a “good place” and a “no place”—a place that exists nowhere. The first name of the main speaker harkens to the archangel Raphael while his last name means “peddler of nonsense.” And many of the names within Utopia call attention to their own fictiveness, as More himself obliquely points out. While maintaining a veneer of verisimilitude, More writes that, *if* he had indeed written a fiction, he

would have managed it so that, even though I might have wanted to deceive the ignorant mob, I would at least have inserted some pointed

5 Some examples include the ease with which the Utopians practiced divorce and euthanasia, as well as how they permitted female priests as well as male—all practices anathema to a devout Catholic like More. A further contradiction might be seen in Hythloday’s Epicurean argument concerning philosophy and politics, i.e., that it runs counter to true philosophy for a philosopher to engage in politics, even as an advisor. Advisors must lead by indirection and half-truths (because full truths cannot be uttered safely). Philosophers, however, should never say what is not true. More himself, of course, was an extremely active political figure, thus leading to doubt about the equivalence between More himself and Hythloday.

hints which would have let the more learned discover what I was about. Thus even if I had done nothing more than assign to the ruler, river, city and island such names as would have informed learned readers that the island is nowhere, the city is a phantom, the river has no water, the ruler no people, which would not have been hard to do and would have been much more elegant than what I actually did, for if I had not been forced by historical accuracy, I am not so stupid as to use those barbarous and meaningless names Utopia, Anyder, Amaurot, and Ademus. (139)

The joke, of course, is that More does *precisely* what he disavows doing. *A View* contains no such pointed hints, however. The dialogue operates on a quite surface level. Eudoxus (whose name means “good belief”) listens to—and gradually becomes persuaded by—his friend Irenius. Throughout the first half of the dialogue, Eudoxus’s literary existence enables Irenius conveniently to discourse on the laws, customs, and religion of the Irish natives. In the second half of the dialogue, Eudoxus serves as the voice of natural sentiment and mercy. He protests Irenius’s increasingly violent “solutions” to the Irish problem before, finally, succumbing to the inexorable pressure of Irenius’s “logic.”

The primary motivation for reading *A View* against the grain, it seems to me, is the desire to “salvage” Spenser as a poet. Yeats, for one, had readily distinguished between Spenser the poet and Spenser the colonial administrator, lamenting that Spenser the man had been so unfortunately subservient to “the State,” someone who wrote “out of thoughts and emotions that had been organized by the State” and saw nothing “but what he was desired to see” (372), blinding the poet in him to the native genius of the Irish whom he should have admired. Nonetheless, as Ciaran Brady accurately notes, we cannot so easily gloss over the fact that Spenser’s apparent “ethical defense of brutality” calls into question Spenser’s entire “moral sensibility” (18)—a stunning denouement for a poet whose great theme is the “twelve private morall vertues.” Stephen Greenblatt’s conclusion might seem doubly outrageous, suggesting as he does that Edmund Spenser saw the destruction of Irish culture (seen as the barbarous Other) as vital to maintaining English identity and therefore English colonial power. Greenblatt concludes, “Spenser’s art does not lead us to perceive ideology critically, but rather affirms the existence and inescapable moral power of ideology as that principle of truth toward which art forever yearns” (192). For some, it is difficult to accept that Spenser’s art—seen as a paragon of humanistic learning and virtue—connotes the “inescapable moral power of ideology,” which would effectively undermine the entire Renaissance humanist project of virtuous citizenship and active participation in civic life. The desire to exculpate Spenser can go to amazing lengths. Jean Brink argues, for example, that “the grounds for attributing the *View* to Spenser are highly circumstantial” (221)—the logic being that Spenser cannot be held accountable for views that do not belong to him. While her argument rests mainly on the fact that no scholar has yet done significant textual analysis on *A View*’s numerous extant manuscripts, Brink *at best* only raises a few questions against the long-held view of Spenser’s authorship. Yet such questions are only raised out

of the apparently appalling realization that “Spenser the political scientist” does irreparable harm to “Spenser the moral-humanist poet.”

In a post-deconstructionist age, I take it as axiomatic that *all* texts are inherently unstable, and that it is legitimately *possible* to read *A View* against the grain. In other words, texts are not unified wholes intended to portray one clear meaning (or a finite number of such meanings) to a passively responsive reader. Rather, texts carry within themselves the seeds of their own subversion, dependent only on the willingness of some daring critic to point them out. Even if we do not grant *A View* the same sort of irony recognized for *Utopia* or even a text like Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly*, someone might legitimately argue that ambiguity lies at the core of *A View*. Ciaran Brady, claiming that *A View* was originally written as a prose tract on politics, argues that Spenser eventually switched to the dialogue form because he wanted to place his brutal policies within the humanist tradition—worried that, if he simply stated his views bluntly in treatise form, the English may otherwise become “brutalized by the task which they were being urged to undertake in Ireland” (47). This Spenser may be more palatable to some, insofar as it seems to explain why Spenser may have felt no contradiction between his roles as poet and politician, but hardly constitutes a *defense* of Spenser, especially under a postcolonial viewpoint. Reconciling the poet with the colonial administrator does not, in the end, absolve the colonial administrator.⁶

The question then becomes: how *likely* is it that Spenser’s political tract would subvert its own surface meaning? To this question I would like to make two comments. My first point involves what political philosopher Leo Strauss calls “esoteric writing.” Users of this art incorporate both an exoteric and an esoteric teaching into their texts. The exoteric teaching is meant for cursory readings of texts; the content seems relatively culturally and politically acceptable. The esoteric teaching, however, contains more heterodox opinions—the sorts of opinions that might question the foundations of what the society considers to be sacred and unanimous, or, less dramatically, question opinions held to be salutary to society in general (such as belief in a god who upholds the moral order). Those who hold heterodox views must provisionally accept orthodox opinion before guiding readers with a philosophical disposition into replacing the orthodox opinion with heterodox (and philosophical) knowledge. Thus (discussing the Muslim philosopher Fārābī), Strauss says that it is “rash to identify the teaching of the *falāsifa* with what they taught most frequently or most conspicuously” (17). These careful writers must be take the fate of Socrates as their

⁶ Wesley Kisting also attempts to mitigate some of the sting of Spenser’s imperialism. He argues that critics such as Ciaran Brady and Nicholas Canny improperly ignore *A View*’s dialogue form, seeing it as a “monovocal” text; under their view, Spenser equals Irenius and Eudoxus constitutes the straw man. Nonetheless, even Kisting can only achieve so much by arguing that “equivocal language infuses” Spenser’s two most relevant works, *A View* and Book V of the *Faerie Queene*, which allegedly results in a “moral ambivalence” equally present in both works (29). That is to say, Kisting claims that Spenser simultaneously acknowledges Irenius’s violent strategy and sees “mercy as a dire threat to justice as well as a serious failure of the reader’s moral responsibility to rescue Ireland from damnable savagery” (32). Even if we accept the claim that the logic behind *A View* is ultimately “self-subverting” (29), Spenser’s concrete position as an advocate of bloody-minded English imperialism does not save him from the ultimate charge, one also leveled by Chinua Achebe against Joseph Conrad—that he is a “a thoroughgoing racist” (1789).

guiding principle, a man accused for introducing new gods into the city and for thereby corrupting the young. The questioning stance implied by all philosophy poses dangers to political societies and political regimes, who need a fundamental agreement (without serious argument) about “sacred” things in order to maintain social and political stability. Esoteric writers, wishing to philosophize while avoiding persecution, therefore place contradictions, ambiguities, instabilities within their texts that undermine the exoteric interpretation (36). Such clues guide the careful reader towards the hidden—but personally dangerous—real teaching of the text.

Unfortunately, notwithstanding the (anti-deconstructive) thesis that texts may contain secret-but-true meanings, Spenser’s *View* does not qualify for esoteric reading. This art is meant to protect the holder of heterodox opinions from persecution. In such texts, a bland meaning masks more subversive or dangerous meanings. *A View*, however, operates in precisely the opposite way—the shocking opinion is stated outright, seemingly *convincing* the rational Eudoxus. If “mercy” toward the colonized were the text’s actual purposes, there seems to be no reason for hiding it—especially as Irenius explicitly links that mercy to Queen Elizabeth. Although anti-Irish sentiment was rampant at the time, it did not exist to the extent that advocates of mercy would have been persecuted.

Indeed, framing an argument for a “merciful” policy toward Ireland might have found a number of palatable forms for a Christian humanist audience. One such argument could simply be a worry about saving souls—acquiring and maintaining an empire, bloody process that it is, does not lead to the sort of spiritual purity conducive to entering Heaven. (Such an argument puts a religious slant on Spenser’s worry—according to Ciaran Brady’s—about the effect imperial brutality would have on the English subjects who carried them out.) Another argument might rest upon classical foundations. Many ancient political theorists held that a good state (such as Athens or Sparta) must be small in order to be successful. The far-flung Persian empire was the ultimate symbol of luxury and decadence, and it would not have been lost on Spenser that the precipitous decline of Sparta as a Greek power began almost as soon as its victory in the Peloponnesian war granted it Athens’s empire. Additionally, many conservative Romans of the later Republic blamed the perceived decline of Roman virtue on the wealth acquired from newly conquered Carthage and Greece. Such views were readily available to the classically trained Spenser. He might well have employed such arguments—but chose not to.

Writing at a time before any value was placed on multiculturalism, universal rights, or the autonomy of indigenous peoples, “diversity” within a state was not a sign of its progress but a potential cause of its decay. Even the religious “tolerance” of John Locke—a noted liberal thinker—two centuries later did not include atheists or Muslims under the umbrella of that tolerance. The anachronistic desire to judge Spenser according to multiculturalist or postcolonial values leads to my second observation. This one also derives from the classics—namely, the examples set by antiquity. Colonialism was not something stumbled upon with Ireland or the discovery of the New World—it has existed literally through the entirety

of recorded history. And the brutality Spenser advocated in regard to Ireland had wide precedent.

The pity and pathos of the fall of Troy, for example, would *today* have served as the rallying cry for anti-colonialism, but the Greek world, while recognizing the tragedy of the event, nevertheless engaged in warfare and conquest. Calls for “mercy” often went unheeded. Euripides’s play *Trojan Women* objected to the Athenian actions to the island of Delos during the Peloponnesian war. Delos was a neutral city-state, small in size, but the Athenians wished to conquer it in order to intimidate the Spartans. The city-state was conquered, eventually; its men killed, its women and children enslaved—the standard Greek practice for cities defeated in war. Early during the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides relates a story of how the Athenian Assembly decided to put a rebellious *polis* in its empire to the sword, sent off a small force to do so—and repented of its decision two days later. Fortunately, their message reached the navy in time to forestall a slaughter, but on such slender threads did ancient imperial policy hang. Rome was even harsher. Julius Caesar nearly depopulated Gaul in his subjugation of that province, and Carthage was leveled to the ground and its fields sown with salt so that nothing might grow there again. As for the forced relocation Spenser advocated, these too have their historical precedents—most famously with the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. What is important is not that the Elizabethans might find Spenser’s views shocking (many certainly did—otherwise Eudoxus would not have been necessary), but that such shock or horror cannot be seen in the same way as in a world that has witnessed both the Holocaust and de-colonization.

Indeed, Catherine G. Canino makes the argument—which fits nicely with my own general point—that the massacre of the Spanish garrison at Smerwick would *not* have earned Lord Grey the censure accorded him by Irenius in *A View*. In other words Irenius, in defending Lord Grey’s actions, is actually the source of the Lord Grey’s reputation as a “bloody” man. According to state papers and personal correspondence during the period, Grey was never censured, whether in Ireland, England, or the continent. Elizabeth’s well-known letter to Grey mentioning his “happy success against the invaders” and “wishing [only] that those who have been spared had been reserved for her to have extended either justice or mercy” is more congratulations than condemnation—despite being frequently cited as indicating condemnation (qtd. in Canino 7). Canino notes that foreign reaction to Smerwick also seems muted. Overall, while Grey was criticized and maligned by many, which eventually led to his recall,

this criticism was not, as *the View* states, because of his representation as a ‘bloody’ man. The state papers clearly demonstrate that Grey was under suspicion of mishandling or overspending state funds; his recall, and virtually all of Elizabeth’s decisions about Ireland, were not caused so much by moral outrage as by simple economics. (Canino 8)

Unfortunately, Canino cites this as evidence supporting Jean Brink’s view questioning the authorship of *A View*. To be fair, although Canino herself think Spenser’s authorship of *A View* unlikely, she also offers two potential alternative explanations: either Spenser might

have misremembered or misreported the man he had once served as secretary, or he might have been attempting to damn Grey under the veneer of praising him. We might choose a fourth option, though. It may be that *A View* is not concerned with *accurately* reporting on Lord Grey; modern positivistic or scientific historiography would be anachronistic during Spenser's time. Rather, Irenius's Lord Grey could be a primarily *literary* character, or someone appropriated by Spenser for literary purposes, in order to highlight what I consider to be the special significance of *A View*—the tension of art as conceived under classical models and of political philosophy as conceived by the *first* modern political philosopher: Niccolo Machiavelli.

Machiavelli and Xenophon; or, Machiavelli's reading of Scipio reading Xenophon

A key section of *The Prince* might be the third chapter, "Of Mixed Princedoms" (by which Machiavelli means adding newly conquered lands to the inherited kingdom). It seems to pertain most directly to the English situation in Ireland. The previous chapter had been "Of Hereditary Princedoms," a vastly shorter chapter indicative of Machiavelli's relative disinterest in that topic. According to Machiavelli, hereditary princedoms are easy to maintain, because "the very antiquity and continuance of [the prince's] rule will efface the memories and causes which lead to innovation" (2)—meaning that people are likely to have forgotten the various acts of evil that must be done in order to subjugate a new province. Machiavelli might also have said that, in such princedoms, it is easier for a prince to practice those virtues as praised by the poets and the philosophers and as incarnated by Marcus Aurelius—ruler of the hereditary kingdom *par excellence*, Rome during the *Pax Romana*.

Yet *mixed* princedoms abound in difficulties. Not only will the people one has harmed become enemies, but so potentially will the people one has helped—if such allies could once open their gates to a foreign conqueror, they might do so again. A greater difficulty, Machiavelli notes, is when the acquired kingdom differs from the imperial kingdom in matters of language, usages, and laws—differences that Irenius amply demonstrates in *A View* after allegedly proving their "barbaric" Scythian origins. In such a situation, says Machiavelli, a "great good fortune, as well as address, is needed to overcome" these obstacles (3). And it is important to note that while "great good fortune" and "address" are necessary⁷—implying a distinction between a controlling Fate outside the self and the prince's own personal *virtù*—elsewhere in *The Prince* Machiavelli seems to collapse two terms into one—that is, *virtù* simply, without any exterior guiding fate. One of Machiavelli's most famous sayings is the maxim that "Fortune is a woman who to be kept under must be beaten and roughly handled; and we see that she suffers herself to be more readily mastered by those who so treat her than by those who are more timid in their approaches" (68). Yet this saying comes only at the *end* of *The Prince*, long after demonstrating the character and necessity of *virtù*. So Machiavelli's initial distinction between *fortuna* and *virtù* is only a façade, a sop to ancient political thought that held man to be partially helpless against

⁷ By "address" Machiavelli means how a prince handles or *addresses* a situation.

what he could not control. Under my interpretation, what Machiavelli really intends here is to show how princes can *always* subjugate new kingdoms that differ from the original kingdom in matters of language, usages, and laws.

The easiest way to pacify a mixed principedom, continues Machiavelli, is for the prince to dwell there himself. He gives the example of the Turks. Dwelling in a province tends to solve problems before they arise; it also ensures that the province “is not pillaged by [the prince’s] officers” (4). Such a relocation would not have been palatable for Elizabeth of course, though colonization might have succeeded better if she had. According to Nicholas Canny in *Making Ireland British*, a key reason England never succeeded in making Ireland “British” was the greed of low-level British officials called “servitors” who, in their rapacity for new “plantation” lands, basically sabotaged attempts to assimilate the Irish. Ardently Protestant in their sympathies, these servitors—using Spenser’s political tract as a rallying cry—permanently alienated the native Catholic Irish.

Otherwise, if princes will not abide in the new kingdom, they might also establish colonies, a proposal strongly championed by Ireuius.⁸ A problem emerges even here, however. As Machiavelli says, the only people harmed by colonies are the displaced natives. Those “who are thus injured form but a small part of the community, and remaining scattered and poor can never become dangerous” (4). As Ireuius points out, however, dispossessed Irish *can* become problematic, since the bogs and marshes can provide shelter for potential rebels, and even their attire—such as the Gaelic mantle—can prove dangerous to the colonizer because of its immense utility. Ireuius, in his practical experience of Ireland, knows that the dispossessed *can* be a significant problem.

Yet here we have encountered a *faux* statement by Machiavelli, a case of misdirection. Famously, Machiavelli later states that “men will sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony” (44)—basically asserting the primacy of wealth over kinship, meaning that confiscating the lands of natives is the most potent means of radicalizing them against a new prince. Yet Machiavelli contradicts the “colonies are safe options” principle *even within the same chapter*. When Machiavelli discusses King Louis IX’s failure in Italy, for example, he lists five blunders committed by that king, such as aggrandizing another foreign power (Pope Alexander VI), dividing his new principedom with yet another power (Spain), and so forth. No sooner does Machiavelli recount these errors, however, then he dismisses them. “[A]ll these blunders might not have proved disastrous to him while he lived, had he not added to them a sixth in depriving the Venetians of their dominions” (7). So while colonies can successfully aid in the subjugation of a new principedom, dispossessed natives like the Venetians or the Irish *are* a problem—perhaps *the* most important problem.

Having brought attention to this problem, however, Machiavelli once again grows coy. The natural maneuver at this point would be to explain *how* Louis might have successfully deprived the Venetians of their dominions. Machiavelli instead changes the topic; he

⁸ Machiavelli also disparages garrisons as too costly, but Ireuius seems to have understood that objection when he, several times, answers Eudoxus’s concerns about cost by saying that the garrisons should live off the rent of the land they occupy.

moves onto a discussion concerning the idea that it is better (following Roman practice) to engage in war sooner rather than later. Machiavelli hereby shows his reluctance to make his points explicit. Yet given his statements about how easily hereditary princes maintain their principdoms (since the people have “forgotten” the measures taken to subjugate the principality originally), Irenius seems to have successfully grasped Machiavelli’s meaning when he advocates for extermination. Claims that colonies are worthwhile consequences with negligible consequences do not fool Irenius; those consequences urgently require handling.

A clearer example of Machiavelli’s ultimate goal may be gleaned from the following passage:

Because it would have been useless and dangerous for Pertinax and Alexander, being new princes, to imitate Marcus, who was heir to the principality; and likewise it would have been utterly destructive to Caracalla, Commodus, and Maximinus to have imitated Severus, they not having sufficient valour to enable them to tread in his footsteps. (55)

The passage comes from the chapter, “That One Should Avoid Being Despised And Hated.” A great disparity lies between the two examples: Marcus Aurelius (the beloved emperor) and Septimus Severus (a brutal but successful one). Many princes with *virtù* have attempted to imitate either one or the other, but those who failed to successfully imitate Marcus did so because they were not the heirs of principalities—a truth recognized by Pertinax and Alexander, who therefore did not attempt to cultivate the same virtues cultivated by Marcus. Yet, Machiavelli continues, of those princes who failed to successfully imitate Severus, their failure was not due to some external circumstance (such as the misfortune not to inherit a principality), but to a failure of personal *virtù*. In other words, a prince may fail to imitate Marcus Aurelius if he lacks either *virtù* or an inherited kingdom, but princes who fail to imitate Severus fail only through lacking *virtù*. In a prince, morality is a luxury, nothing more—neither necessary nor even desirable. Princely morality is superfluous. As such, Machiavelli has no special theoretical space for it within a truly modern political philosophy.

The superfluity of morality in politics leads us, slowly, into Machiavelli’s reading of Xenophon. In the Renaissance, Xenophon enjoyed a high reputation, more so than now, and Machiavelli discusses him more often than he does Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero combined. According to W.R. Newell, Xenophon was the closest of all the ancient political thinkers to the Italian political philosopher; Xenophon alone of ancient thinkers “allowed the ambition for limitless rule to unfold in all its grandeur” (121). Whereas Plato and Aristotle sought to limit the desire for acquisitiveness, Xenophon took it seriously as a political principle. Yet where Machiavelli disagreed with Xenophon was in Xenophon’s failure to emancipate himself completely from the distinction between illegitimate and legitimate, tyrant and king, base and noble, vice and virtue. Often taken as the portrait of the ideal prince, Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* contains some ambivalence towards the Persian monarch: “This

mixture of admiration for Cyrus and reservations about him makes Xenophon unwilling to depict Cyrus either as an out-and-out tyrant or as morally flawless” (126).⁹

Although Machiavelli approves of Xenophon’s approbation of ambition, he must also distinguish between a textual Cyrus and a real Cyrus—viz., the actual prince versus the literary prince created by Xenophon. Whereas Achilles, Alexander, and Caesar had all imitated forebears, Scipio alone had imitated not a forebear but the textual Cyrus:

And whoever reads the life of Cyrus, written by Xenophon, will recognize afterwards in the life of Scipio how that imitation was his glory, and how in chastity, affability, humanity, and liberality Scipio conformed to those things which have been written of Cyrus by Xenophon. (Machiavelli 66)

And it was commonly accepted that Scipio *did* greatly admire Xenophon. Cicero described the education of Cyrus as a “model of the just empire” and the constant guide of Scipio (Newell 110). But the problem is that those qualities described by Xenophon are not the sorts of qualities that enable one to acquire new principdoms, as Machiavelli well understood. Scipio’s career in the province of Spain was not successful *until* he adopted more “brutal” practices. We see such disjunction between political literature and political reality repeatedly in Machiavelli. Marcus Aurelius succeeded only because he inherited his kingdom; King Louis IX lost his kingdoms in Italy because he “kept faith” with the foreign powers he invited to share power there. And, as Spenser’s Irenius no doubt realizes, having deprived native Irish of their estates in order to plant English colonies, the noblest virtues of a prince—chastity, affability, humanity, and liberality—cannot be practiced safely. Unlike the English themselves—a people, once conquered by the Romans, who have forgotten the concrete measures taken by the Romans to subjugate them successfully¹⁰—the displaced Irish would rebel, for they—remember all too well the measures necessary to

9 Many scholars have wondered at the apparent discrepancy in *Cyropaedia* of presenting the “ideal” ruler, only to show the collapse of that ruler’s empire in the final chapter. James Tatum argues that Xenophon suffered from a divided mind. According to Tatum, the “gap between the political and historical world of the *Cyropaedia* finally outweighed [Xenophon’s] authorial desire to preserve the integrity of the text he created” (224). For a different view, see Christopher Nadon’s *Xenophon’s Prince: Republic and Empire in the Cyropaedia*. Nadon argues that Cyrus was *far* from Xenophon’s ideal ruler. Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio [had] all referred to Cyrus as a “rapacious” king, and it was only in the fifteenth century that he began appearing “in a number of ‘mirrors of princes’ as an ideal ruler” (13). Nonetheless, Nadon agrees that *Machiavelli* read Xenophon from within the civic-humanist tradition and, therefore, as illegitimately idealizing a political figure. “Instead of recording what Cyrus must have done in order to succeed, Xenophon, in his naivety, imagined rather what he thought a good prince ought to do. He thereby misled Scipio as to the kind of duties imposed by the necessities faced by real generals and statesmen” (16). For Machiavelli had imagined that young Scipio had read the *Cyropaedia* cursorily, noticing only the fairy tale Cyrus on the surface of the text without seeing the treacherous, grasping, deceitful Cyrus at the core. Following Leo Strauss, Nadon believes that Xenophon wrote esoterically, containing a safe “surface” meaning and hidden yet dangerous “inner” meaning—a mode of writing that Machiavelli recognized and practiced himself. The civic-humanist tradition of a Philip Sidney, who praised teachers of virtue in general—and Xenophon over Plato specifically, because the former wrote poetry with philosophy in contrast to writing philosophy simply—is therefore subverted. In a way, my argument is that Spenser’s political science is a subversion of his poetry (and vice versa).

10 All the difference in the world exists between remembering *intellectually* the process of colonization, and remembering it *psychologically*.

evict them from their ancestral lands. *This* is the essential point about Machiavelli's reading of Xenophon. As Newell says, Scipio (initially) followed the textual Cyrus, but a ruler such as Hannibal followed the *real* Cyrus—who, like Hannibal, had to rule a wide variety of peoples with different languages and different customs. (Newell notes that Machiavelli's interpretation of Xenophon's Cyrus is possibly polemically sugar-coated, since Xenophon does portray his Cyrus as inspiring fear.)¹¹

Machiavelli's understanding of Xenophon offers, I believe, a way to grasp the seeming disparity between Spenser's art and Spenser's political science. Spenser's art owed a great debt to classical models, however so much he revised and expanded them. Not only does Spenser attempt to portray the "twelue priuate morall virtues" in the ideal realm of Faerie, but he—like Xenophon—cannot completely emancipate his art from distinctions between the noble and the base or between vice and virtue. Even Book V of the *Faerie Queene*, which defends Lord Grey in the figure of Artegall, remains beholden to the distinctions between tyranny and legitimate rule, right and wrong, and justice and injustice that belong to classical political philosophy. Grantorto, for example, is explicitly called "tyrant" (v.xii.25). Artegall himself studied "true Iustice how to deale / And day and night employ'd his busie paine" (v.xii.26). *True* justice. The word "justice" does not occur anywhere in *The Prince*, however. Justice—true or otherwise—has no place within Machiavelli's political philosophy, nor does the term "tyrant." It is precisely this same sort of "emancipation" from classical political philosophy that finds its way into *A View*, however. By my count, excluding titles like "Justice of the Peace," the concept of justice or injustice appears as an abstract general concept acting as a foundational legal principle only four times in the text.¹² (The words "just" and "unjust" appear more frequently, but only as individual attributes or deeds.) Every instance is spoken by Irenius—not the moral and trustworthy Eudoxus, significantly. By the latter half of the book, though, *all* instances of "justice" and even most of the instances for "just" disappear. . . except in relation to Lord Grey, whom Spenser (and Irenius?) have a stake in defending. (Incidentally, the defense of Lord Grey is where Eudoxus's own references to justness grow most forceful and frequent.) "Tyranny" or "tyrant" appears absolutely nowhere in *A View*. So it seems safe to say that Spenser, in contrast to his art, felt comfortable in phasing out an important concept like justice from his political tract, except where it might polemically serve Irenius's needs. Spenser, seeing the practical problems of colonial rule, of annexing

11 When "Machiavelli wants to emphasize the need to use fraud, he buttresses his argument with Xenophon's version of Cyrus. When he wants to emphasize the need to use force, however, he ignores Xenophon's version in favor of his own. The implication is that while Xenophon teaches well enough the need for fraud, he does not make his readers sufficiently aware of the need to use force" (124-25).

12 The first two instances are the most significant, and they both occur relatively early in the text: "laws ought to be fashioned unto the manners and conditions of the people" so as to not "pervert iustice to extreame iustice" (20); "true iustice punisheth nothing but the evill act or wicked word" (30). These two cases are the only places where Irenius comes close to formulating a theoretical concept of justice. The next two instances of the term are less global in scope. First, in the scoffing words of Irenius, the *Irish* "complaine hee hath no iustice" due to the partiality of non-Irish magistrates (31), and the last reference is a politically charged for Irenius, critiquing Thomas Butler, eleventh Earl of Ormond, against whom Spenser may have had a grudge for his role in having Lord Grey recalled in 1582 (37). The term justice appears nowhere in the following three-fourths of the text.

onto an old principedom a *new* principedom differing in laws and customs, adopts the modern attitude that his artistry cannot theoretically accept.

Conclusion

According to Leo Strauss, Machiavelli's great innovation in political philosophy is that Machiavelli—the paramount “teacher of evil” (9)—had proclaimed “openly and triumphantly a corrupting doctrine that ancient writers had taught covertly or with all signs of repugnance” (10).¹³ We have seen how Machiavelli can be deliberately coy with his doctrines, deliberately contradicting himself in certain places, avoiding stating his true meaning explicitly in others, and generally talking around certain issues that he simply expects his readers to intuit. What *Spenser* does in *A View* is proclaim a Machiavellian teaching with an openness that even the famed Italian hesitated to use. *A View* is remarkably straight-forward in its policies of extermination, famine, cultural destruction, and forced relocation. Rather than writing esoterically, Spenser ameliorates the shockingness of his proposals via the dialogue form, a rhetorical device situating those views within the humanist tradition. It is intriguing to note that Spenser mentions Machiavelli only once, at the very end of his text—and the reference is not to *The Prince* but to *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli's republican tract. So, whereas Machiavelli chooses to couch his true teaching in misdirection and innuendo, Spenser proclaims that teaching openly—but attempts to soften its horror under more “liberal” auspices. Spenser's reputation as a moral poet, we might also suppose, perhaps partially insulated him against the same contemporary English opprobrium applied to Machiavelli himself, whom they believed to be an atheist and the worst kind of cynic.

Ultimately, I have argued for a fundamental split in how we should read Spenser. His poetry harkens back to classical moral writing, brought to Spenser by his admiration for Sir Philip Sidney; however, his political science shows a divisive break with ancient political philosophy. The incompatibility of the two positions shows the influence of two entirely different traditions of thought (ancient and modern) and two entirely different genres of writing (poetry and political science). Perhaps my particular position does not absolve Spenser from blame, although that is not really my intent. My greatest worry is that a modern moral framework might blind our judgment to methods of valuing and interpreting that have since become obscured by the centuries—Spenser's insight into Machiavelli's esoteric writing *may* seem implausible today, but only because esoteric writing has ceased to be necessary within modern liberal democracy. Now, on whether Spenser's humanist-*realpolitik* or Machiavelli esoteric-*realpolitik* is the more invidious or subversive method, that I leave up to the individual reader. Needless to say, for an age steeped in universal human rights, an age that too well remembers the Holocaust and decolonization, neither method is entirely palatable. But that is a modern perspective. Even if we lament Spenser as a poet of the state, as Yeats does, we should also acknowledge that he possessed

13 For example, see Plato's treatment of Thrasymachus and Callicles, or Thucydide's dialogue between the Melians and the Athenian envoys.

enough freedom of mind and intellectual acumen not to mix his poetry with his politics. Perhaps the best that can be said for now is that we should agree with Nicholas Canny's assessment that *A View* ranks as "a social and political statement of the first importance" ("Spenser" 203).

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