

Politics and Literature in the Thought of Machiavelli and Robert Penn Warren

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Writing on the inspiration behind *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren described living in Louisiana in the 1930s as “witnessing a drama which was a version of the world’s drama, and the drama of history, too, the old drama of power and ethics.”<sup>1</sup> This “drama” is the recurring struggle to answer questions about the justifications for power, whether ethical or not, and about power’s limitations, if there are any. For Warren, these questions of power raise serious concerns not only for the well-being of society and political life, but also for the individual.

The topic of power is, of course, also of great interest for Machiavelli. One of his primary concerns is to understand how one acquires and maintains power. Thus, Machiavelli is part of this “old drama.” Indeed, he is one of the key voices in this drama, and it is no wonder that Warren draws on him as he seeks to understand these issues for himself. Questions about the relation of power and ethics are of enduring human concern. As such, the ongoing dialogue about these issues occurs in various outlets, including history, political theory, and literature. Both Warren and Machiavelli understand this, and each draws on his knowledge of these various fields in his own work.

In addition to shared concerns about the nature of political power, Machiavelli and Warren were both writers. It should not be overlooked that the “cold-faced Florentine” wrote fictional works.<sup>2</sup> In addition to his political books,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Penn Warren, “In the Time of All the King’s Men” *New York Times*, May 31, 1981, Late City Final Edition, <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/books/072098warren-all.html> (accessed July 1, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Ridolfi points out that Machiavelli is one of the few Italian writers to have composed great works in more than one genre. Robert Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Cecil Grayson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 175.

Machiavelli wrote comedies, poems, and even a short story. His plays *Mandragola* and *Clizia*, in particular, have attracted attention from students of political philosophy as providing further insight into Machiavelli's ideas.<sup>3</sup> Anthony Parel explains why those interested in Machiavelli's political thought should study his literary works:

For they bring to light more clearly than other writings an important aspect of Machiavelli's genius. They formally reveal Machiavelli the artist, the poet, the writer who uses literary imagination as a vehicle of political truth. The conveying of truth through imagination means that, for Machiavelli, reason and science are not the exclusive media of valid political communication. He balances rational and scientific truths against truths intuitively and imaginatively seen. For politics affects the whole man, and Machiavelli is fully aware of this. There is, in short, a mixture of reason and imagination, science and advocacy, in Machiavelli: and the literary writings bear full testimony to this mixture.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Machiavelli, perhaps the most political of political philosophers, understands that a literary presentation of political ideas may be as significant as a wholly rational approach.

So here we have Niccolò Machiavelli, the political insider and thinker who writes poetry and plays, and Robert Penn Warren, the poet and novelist who treats political themes. Do these two men share some understanding of the relation between philosophy, politics, and literature? I will show that they both see literature as a way to think about and communicate political ideas. Furthermore, each believes literature to be a means of educating individuals and thus influencing society. Machiavelli and Warren differ, however, on how they use literature

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<sup>3</sup> For several examples, see Vickie Sullivan, ed., *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Parel, "Machiavelli *Minore*" in *The Political Calculus: Essays of Machiavelli's Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Parel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 182-183.

politically. For Machiavelli, literature provides a tool for spreading his ideas. For Warren, literature serves as a means for working through philosophical problems and testing political ideas.

Machiavelli and Warren each provide ample justification for the study of literature and politics. Both of these writers deal with political subjects and both wrote literary works. Most significant, perhaps, is that both Machiavelli and Warren clearly state that literature has more than mere entertainment value because it can serve an important social purpose.

### Machiavelli

Machiavelli's thoughts on the usefulness of literature are found in two of his less well-known works: the *Discourse or Dialogue on Our Language* and the Prologue to *Clizia*.<sup>5</sup> In the former, Machiavelli carries on a fictional dialogue with Dante in which Machiavelli attacks Dante's claim that he wrote in the language of the court as opposed to the Florentine dialect. *Clizia* is Machiavelli's reworking of Plautus's comedy *Casina*, and in the prologue Machiavelli provides a disclaimer or justification to his audience for the play they are about to see. In each of these works, Machiavelli comments on the didactic use of comedy. Though Machiavelli seems to have a preference for comedy (all of his plays are comedies), his claim about its ability to teach useful lessons seems applicable to literature in general. A

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<sup>5</sup> There has been some dispute as to whether the *Discourse or Dialogue Concerning Our Language* is Machiavelli's. Ridolfi admits there is no tangible evidence to support the claim that Machiavelli wrote it, but believes he did due to the claims made in the work (Ridolfi, 174). Susan Shell also argues against critics who deny that Machiavelli wrote the *Discourse*. Susan Meld Shell, "Machiavelli's Discourse on Language" in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works*, ed. Vickie B. Sullivan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

brief discussion of the relevant passages from these two works should be sufficient to make clear Machiavelli's perspective.

*Discourse or Dialogue on Our Language*

Machiavelli begins the *Discourse or Dialogue on Our Language* with a paragraph asserting his loyalty to his own country and arguing that one has an obligation to one's own country. Indeed, one's greatest obligation, he says, is to one's country since "he owes his very existence, and later, all the benefits that nature, and fortune offer him, to her."<sup>6</sup> This very strong statement ranks country above nature and fortune as the provider of one's existence and all else (God is not mentioned at all). Every advantage, Machiavelli reiterates, one owes to country. Further, one's obligation is proportional to the nobility of the country. The nobler one's country, the greater one's obligation. Presumably, more noble countries provide greater benefit to their populations and thus elicit stronger obligation. This obligation is so powerful, according to Machiavelli, that nothing it does can excuse turning against it: "[S]he can be guilty of no persecution that justifies your injuring her."<sup>7</sup> Even should one have a "legitimate grievance," which Machiavelli does not define, one still cannot think or act against one's country without incurring the infamy of a parricide.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *A Dialogue on Language*, in J. R. Hale, trans., *The Literary Works of Machiavelli*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1979), 175. Interestingly, the reason for these strong statements of patriotism and duty to country at the beginning of the *Dialogue* is to serve as an introduction to Machiavelli's argument that Dante wrote in the Florentine vernacular rather than Italian.

<sup>7</sup> Machiavelli, *Dialogue*, 175.

Machiavelli's statements here remind one of the arguments found in the *Crito* where Socrates carries on a dialogue of sorts with the Laws of Athens. The Laws, given voice by Socrates, argue that he has an obligation to obey them as they have begat him and nurtured him.<sup>9</sup> The Laws further claim that the duty to one's fatherland exceeds the duty to one's parents. Would you not agree, the Laws ask Socrates, "...that it is not pious to do violence to mother and father, and still less by far to the fatherland than to them?"<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli's statement is noticeably similar: "For if it is an evil deed to strike one's father or mother for any reason, it necessarily follows that it is still more criminal to savage one's country."<sup>11</sup>

Later in the work, Machiavelli discusses the importance of language for comedy. To be well written, he says, comedies must use native words and expressions: "[F]or though the aim of comedy is to hold up a mirror to domestic life, the way it does this, all the same, is with a certain urbanity and with expressions which excite laughter, so that the men who come eagerly to enjoy themselves, taste afterwards the useful lesson that lay underneath."<sup>12</sup> Comedy has an educational purpose; it "can convey various lessons, useful to our daily life."<sup>13</sup> Machiavelli then

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<sup>8</sup> Though Machiavelli does not explain what a "legitimate grievance" would be, we might guess that he has in mind his arrest and torture because his name appeared on a list of potential conspirators against the Medici. See Ridolfi, 135-137; Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (New York: Random House, 1994), 33-36.

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Crito*, 50b-51a; in Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, trans., *Four Texts on Socrates* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 110.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Crito*, 51b.

<sup>11</sup> Machiavelli, *Dialogue*, 175.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

goes on to claim that to achieve this end requires comedy to use language that can be understood by all in order to achieve his end. “But to treat the subject in a comic fashion, it is necessary to use words and expressions which have such an effect, and they do not and cannot do unless they are local, popular, and understood by everybody.”<sup>14</sup> The need for clarity is thus twofold: one must understand the words and expression to, one, get the joke and, two, learn the lesson. This suggests that Machiavelli is consciously clear in his own writing (at least in his comedies), seeking to make himself understood rather than trying to obscure his meaning. If we take what Machiavelli says here seriously and he is telling the truth (two questionable, though not utterly dismissible assumptions), we should give substantial consideration to the clear and direct meanings of the text, at least in reading his comedy.

### Prologue to *Clizia*

Machiavelli opens his prologue with a statement about the constant return of events. He introduces the basic plot with a setting in ancient Athens, alluding to Plautus’s version, but he then claims that the same thing occurred more recently in Florence. Machiavelli favors the Florentine version because he judges that the audience “would get greater pleasure from this one than the other. For Athens is in ruins, her streets, her public squares, her sites are not recognizable to you. Moreover, her citizens spoke Greek, and you wouldn’t understand that language.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Machiavelli, *Dialogue*, 188.

<sup>15</sup> Machiavelli, *Clizia*, trans. Daniel T. Gallagher (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1996), 3.

This is of course a joke; Machiavelli could certainly have set the play in Athens while writing the dialogue in his own language. Behind the joke, however, we get the lesson seen in the *Dialogue on Language*: the words and phrases of comedy must be local and understandable to the audience.

In the prologue to *Clizia* Machiavelli again openly states the usefulness of comedies. Here the topic is introduced as a sort of disclaimer. The narrator of the prologue informs the audience “that the author of this comedy is a very well-mannered man, and that he would be troubled if, while seeing it performed, there should appear to you to be some indecency in it.”<sup>16</sup> This is already the third mention of “decency” (*onestà*) in the play, a word used five times (in various forms) in the prologue. This apparent concern for decency is particularly striking as the whole plot turns on the indecency of an elderly adoptive father conspiring to bed his adopted daughter. But the narrator of the prologue insists that the author does not believe there is any indecency in the play, and if it appears to the audience that there is, the author is excused.

The reason any appearance of indecency is excused is because of the dual purpose which comedies are meant to serve:

Comedies were discovered in order to *benefit* and to *delight* the spectators. Truly it is a great benefit to any man, and especially to youth, to know the avarice of an old man, the passion of a lover, the tricks of a servant, the gluttony of a parasite, the misery of a pauper, the ambition of one who's rich, the flatteries of a whore, the untrustworthiness of all men. Comedies are full of such examples, and all these things can be presented with very great decency.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Machiavelli, *Clizia*, 4-5.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 5, emphasis added. A similar list is found in *A Dialogue on Language*: “This is why it is difficult to use serious characters; for there can be no gravity in a cheating servant, a ridiculous old



It is useful to recognize the vices of others, and comedies can give examples of these in an innocuous way. At the same time, comedies can entertain by making the audience laugh. Only three types of speech, however, can cause such laughter, according to the prologue—“silly or insulting or amorous.”<sup>18</sup> Machiavelli wants his audience to laugh and enjoy his play, but he claims he has not included silliness or insulting speech, so he must rely on “characters in love and to accidents that arise in love.”<sup>19</sup> The narrator again addresses the matter of decency, explaining that if the play does contain anything indecent, it will be expressed in a manner that will not embarrass the women in the audience.

Machiavelli’s thoughts on the didactic use of comedies are somewhat brief and undeveloped. They should not be overlooked, however. Machiavelli often suggests a desire to pass on his knowledge to others. In the *Discourses on Livy*, for example, Machiavelli claims, “For it is the duty of a good man to teach others the good that you could not work because of the malignity of the times and of fortune, so that when many are capable of it, someone of them more loved by heaven may be able to work it.”<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli’s comments on comedy seem to suggest that he sees

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man, in a love-crazed youth, in a wheedling harlot, in a greedy parasite, yet their actions can convey various lessons, useful to our daily life,” 188. The list from *Clizia* contains three additional items to that in the *Dialogue*: “...the misery of a pauper, the ambition of one who’s rich, ... [and] the untrustworthiness [*poca fede*—little faith] of all men.”

<sup>18</sup> Machiavelli, *Clizia*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 125.

his literary works as much a part of this task of teaching others as his political works.

### Robert Penn Warren

Robert Penn Warren's thoughts on the social and political significance that literature can have are expressed in his 1962 essay "Why Do We Read Fiction?" and in his short book *Democracy and Poetry*. In "Why Do We Read Fiction?" Warren focuses on the way reading literature provides the reader with new experiences and opportunities to practice judgment, thus facilitating growth. In *Democracy and Poetry* Warren delves deeper into the relationship between the self, poetry, and democracy

#### "Why Do We Read Fiction?"

"Why do we read fiction? The answer is simple. We read it because we like it," writes Warren.<sup>21</sup> This pleasure comes, he tells us, because fiction is "an image of life" that appeals to our own interest in life.<sup>22</sup> The center of fiction is conflict, which creates experiences for the characters. Though we tend to seek peace in life, we also crave conflict because it allows us to feel alive. In fiction we can enjoy conflict more fully because this imagined conflict lacks the risks of actual conflict and because the nature of fiction promises resolution.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Warren, "Why Do We Read Fiction?" in *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1989), 55.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 56.

For some, fiction offers an escape from their own lives, a “flight from reality.”<sup>24</sup> For many, reading involves “role-taking,” and in a double way. Part of the reader identifies with the character or characters, while another part remains separate to respond and interpret the work.<sup>25</sup> Warren explains further: “But in trying to understand our appetite for fiction, we can see that the process of role taking not only stems from but also affirms the life process. It is an essential part of growth.”<sup>26</sup> Imaginative play as a child and reading fiction throughout one’s life allow for this role-taking. From this role-taking we become aware of others and of ourselves—we create our self.

This fiction is a “telling” in which we as readers participate and is, therefore, an image of the process by which experience is made manageable. In this process experience is foreshortened, is taken out of the ruck of time, is put into an ideal time where we can scrutinize it, is given an interpretation. In other words, fiction shows, as we have said, a logical—and psychological—structure which implies meaning.<sup>27</sup>

Fiction, Warren argues, can open us up as readers to experience. We may experience things we would not have been able to otherwise. Furthermore, fiction allows us to understand experience by providing it with a framework or some sense of order which is often missing or obscured in our real lives.

Fiction, Warren continues, allows us both to see process and to consider the consequences of action. As we read, we practice judgment:

All stories, as we have said, are based on conflict; and the resolution of the fictional conflict is, in its implications, a judgment too, a judgment of values.

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<sup>24</sup> Warren, “Why Do We Read Fiction?”, 58.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

In the end some shift of values has taken place. Some new awareness has dawned, some new possibility of attitude has been envisaged. Or perhaps some old value is vindicated.<sup>28</sup>

A work of fiction, by presenting experiences in such a way as to suggest meaning, passes judgment on a value or set of values, and in so doing invites the reader to do the same. “[T]he reader has, by imaginative enactment, lived through the process by which the values become valuable.”<sup>29</sup> This is not something that either political or philosophical tracts can accomplish. Whereas the essay or treatise can explain, expound, describe, and even persuade, they cannot move the individual from abstraction to experience. They can appeal to our experiences, but they cannot provide them.

### *Democracy and Poetry*

In 1974 Warren was invited by the National Endowment for the Humanities to deliver the annual Jefferson Lecture. His intent in preparing for the lecture was to examine what the classic American writers had to say about the nature of democracy. “Delivered in his habitually rapid, rasping style,” Joseph Blotner writes, “it was nonetheless a dazzling display of his historical sense and omnivorous reading, ranging from Saint Augustine and Kierkegaard to Dostoyevsky and Buber, from Adams and Emerson to Twain and Faulkner.”<sup>30</sup> The following year, Harvard

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<sup>28</sup> Warren, “Why Do We Read Fiction?”, 63.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography*, (New York: Random House, 1997), 414.

Press published an expanded version of Warren's lectures under the title *Democracy and Poetry*.

In *Democracy and Poetry*, Warren explores the "interrelation" of poetry, democracy, and selfhood. His goal is to show that poetry—a term he uses not to refer to the specific genre but rather "in the broad sense of all 'making' which is art"—plays an indispensable role in democracy.<sup>31</sup> To accomplish this he focuses on the concept of the self and its endangered status in the contemporary world. He defines self as "individuation, the felt principle of significant unity."<sup>32</sup> He further explains what he means by *significant*, stating that it includes continuity and "responsibility—the self as a moral identity, recognizing itself as capable of action worthy of praise or blame."<sup>33</sup> The danger we face today, Warren suggests, is a loss of true self.

In the first of the two essays in this book, "America and the Diminished Self," Warren focuses on what he calls poetry's "diagnostic role."<sup>34</sup> In this capacity poetry is a "social document" analyzing and recording the shared experience, the cultural trends of a society.<sup>35</sup> He reviews American literature and traces the developing criticism of society and the growing crisis of the loss of self. "In other words, our poetry, in fulfilling its function of bringing us face to face with our nature and our

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<sup>31</sup> Warren, *Democracy and Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 3. The term "poetry" may be misleading to some readers as Warren means something more like "art" or "literature." Most of the examples he gives of American "poetry" are actually novels.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

fate, has told us, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, that we are driving toward the destruction of the very assumption on which our nation is presumably founded.”<sup>36</sup> That assumption, according to Warren, is “the concept of the free man, the responsible self.”<sup>37</sup>

In the second essay, “Poetry and Selfhood,” Warren shifts his focus to poetry’s therapeutic role. He believes that “in the end, in the face of the increasingly disintegrative forces in our society, poetry may affirm and reinforce the notion of the self.”<sup>38</sup> The problem we face, according to Warren, seems to find its origins in “the universalizing and abstracting norms of Cartesian thought.”<sup>39</sup> This has led people to conceive of themselves as machines and has disoriented their sense of time. In America this was initially liberating. Any difficulty, it seemed, could be overcome if people were resolute and inventive enough; the limits of human power handed down by history did not seem to apply. Americans eventually came “to believe that solutions would be almost automatic.”<sup>40</sup> Warren claims this has led to a long list of adverse consequences.

Being free from time in this way, Warren claims, undermines the importance of the study of history. He suggests that if these trends continue the study of history will be replaced by the social sciences:

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<sup>36</sup> Warren, *Democracy and Poetry*, 31.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. Warren depicts this danger in *All the King’s Men*, particularly in the character of Jack Burden.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 47; Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 403-405.

<sup>40</sup> Warren, *Democracy and Poetry*, 55.

...the ideal of understanding men and telling their story, noble or vicious, will be replaced by the study of statistics or nonideographic units of an infinite series, and computers will dictate how such units, which breathe and move, can best be manipulated for their own good. We may not be there yet, but we are on the way, for the contempt of the past inevitably means that the self we have is more and more a fictive self, the self of a nonideographic unit, for any true self is not only the result of a vital relation with a community but is also a development in time, and if there is no past there can be no self.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to this importance of the past for the development of the self in an individual, society also requires a sense of the past if it is to have a sense of destiny. This gives it a measure, a standard—"the record of human achievement and the range of human endowment."<sup>42</sup> Warren seems to be suggesting that for a society to grow or progress, it must have an awareness of history. Events of the past provide lessons and benchmarks for future behavior and decisions. History provides society with criteria for judgment; it helps to shape society's identity.

Near the end of Warren's most famous novel *All the King's Men*, the narrator Jack Burden comes to a similar conclusion. While speaking with Anne Stanton, he tries to explain how he has come to terms with his past: "I tried to tell her how if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other, and how if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future."<sup>43</sup> Jack has learned this through long experience; much of his life has been aimless and empty because he refuses to accept uncomfortable events in his past.

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<sup>41</sup> Warren, *Democracy and Poetry*, 56.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>43</sup> Warren, *All the King's Men*, 435.

Warren states “that whatever works to make democracy possible is ‘really’ democratic.”<sup>44</sup> Poetry, he says, is essential to democracy because it is “a dynamic affirmation of, as well as the image of, the concept of the self.”<sup>45</sup> Poetry “is...an element in a vital dialectic. It is the process by which, in imagining itself and the relation of individuals to one another and to it, a society comes to understand itself, and by understanding, discover its possibilities of growth.”<sup>46</sup> In the creative process, the artist or poet often distills the concerns and struggles of the society. The result, Warren suggests, is that the work resonates with individuals who are drawn to it, becomes a part of the social dialogue, and provides the individual with an opportunity for self-reflection and examination.

But how does poetry come into all this? By being an antidote, a sovereign antidote, for passivity. For the basic fact about poetry is that it demands participation, from the secret physical echo in the muscle and nerve that identifies us with the medium, to the imaginative enactment that stirs the deepest recesses where life-will and values reside. Beyond that, it nourishes our life-will in the process of testing our values.<sup>47</sup>

For the writer, the act of creating is an exploration of himself; the resultant work thus represents the author’s struggle with selfhood. The reader also experiences his own struggle with selfhood, when he gives himself over to the work, by causing him to explore other possibilities beyond his own experience. At the end of the work the reader is brought back to confront his own reality, more alert than before.

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<sup>44</sup> Warren, *Democracy and Poetry*, 68.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 76. Here, it sounds like Warren thinks poetry fills the role he argued history served. This leads one to ask, what is the relationship between history and literature?

<sup>47</sup> Warren, *Democracy and Poetry*, 89-90.



### Warren and Machiavelli on the Political Importance of Literature

Warren's thoughts on the relation between politics and literature are more fully developed and expressed than those of Machiavelli. Nevertheless, Machiavelli's claims are sufficient to see some important commonality between the views of these two writers. Machiavelli claims that comedy can teach "various lessons, useful to our daily life" through the examples of various characters. This is similar to Warren's argument that the reader gains access to experiences and knowledge through the double "role-taking" by both identifying with the characters and through judging the characters as an outside observer.<sup>48</sup> Warren goes a step further, claiming that literature not only contains these sorts of useful experiences and lessons, but it can actually serve as a tool in the creation of the "self as moral identity, recognizing itself as capable of action worthy of praise or blame."<sup>49</sup>

It is clear that both Machiavelli and Warren believe literature can have an important political function, which justifies reading their respective literary works to better understand their political ideas. This is not to say, however, that Machiavelli and Warren are in complete agreement on the political function of literature. Despite their similarities, their positions differ in a significant way. For Machiavelli, the primary political use of comedy is to teach a "useful lesson."<sup>50</sup> Literature becomes a means of expressing political ideas—depicting them in an entertaining way so as to make them better learned—and thus spreading them

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<sup>48</sup> Warren, "Why Do We Read Fiction?" 58.

<sup>49</sup> Warren, *Democracy and Poetry*, xiii.

<sup>50</sup> Machiavelli, *Dialogue*, 188.

more effectively. Warren, however, focuses on literature as a means of examining political ideas—“diagnosing” social ills through criticism and providing “therapy” for those ills through reflection.

This distinction can be seen not only in what Machiavelli and Warren say about literature and politics but also in their own literary works. Machiavelli’s plays, particularly *Mandragola*, can be seen as primers that present his political thought through a medium with a wide audience. He does not appear to introduce or explore any ideas or issues not found in his more explicitly political works; the plays are a different means of instruction in the same principles. Warren, on the other hand, seems in his work to be struggling himself with the questions he raises. In *All the King’s Men*, for example, the reader gets a sense that the struggles Jack Burden goes through in trying to make sense of Willie Stark are a shadow of Warren’s own attempts at understanding the relationship between power and ethics.

Neither of these perspectives, of course, denies the possibility of the other. Fiction can be used to convey very specific ideas and principles. It can also possibly be a working out of those principles, a struggle to understand—to make sense of—the world. But both of these purposes are of social and thus political significance. Literature then, for Machiavelli and for Warren, ought not to be overlooked in our attempts to understanding of politics.