

Shakespeare, Tocqueville, Nietzsche: The Politics of Human Greatness
Alexander Tully, Class of 2024

My project began with a few questions: in a democratic century where human beings are growing more and more alike, what role does the exceptional human being play in the political community? What is the role of the genius in political life? What political potential for widespread human flourishing and cultural unification flows from the actions of the great human being—in terms of art, in terms of political stability, in terms of regime type itself? And what, finally, is the ultimate nature and implication of human greatness and the exceptional individual?

Taking three motley geniuses—speaking roughly, a poet, a statesman, and a philosopher—as my guiding stars, I began by searching out portraits of human greatness and its political implications in the dramatic work of William Shakespeare.

Seeking answers to such questions first with a poet and not with a political philosopher might strike one as curious, but only if one forgets that from Plato on all the greatest philosophers have also been great poets—and of the many poet-philosophers in the Western tradition, Shakespeare stands out as the most comprehensive, profound, enigmatic, glittering, and superabundant. Consequently, I began with Shakespeare and an analysis of the action, argument, and psychology of the heroes and villains in all of his Tragedies and Roman Plays. Guided by readings of three major theorists of tragedy—Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche—and my reading of primary philosophical works from the likes of Machiavelli, Montaigne, Coleridge and Emerson, I studied the sketches of human greatness modeled by Shakespeare in such characters as Lear, Hamlet, Coriolanus, and Macbeth. One fact above all became apparent: For Shakespeare, the great human being is by nature *excessive*—he shows them to be men and women of colossal passions, virtues, vices, and individual richness. But by this nature, they are fundamentally tragic figures, destined to either destroy the political community—or be destroyed by it. With Sophocles Shakespeare seems to say “any greatness in human life brings doom.”

I turned to Alexis de Tocqueville and his critical assessment of democratic culture in search of answers for why the great human being seems to be a tragic and vanishing figure. I read *Democracy in America*, paying special attention to the role of religion and democratic poetry—both important vessels of a peculiarly un-individualistic, un-tragic human greatness—in the maintenance of the political community. Tocqueville’s analysis ultimately reveals the psychological forces within a democratic culture that tend to exclude and deter the growth of the genius, the other, the hero, and the great human being. What is prepared instead is the path towards a general similitude among human beings. The result of this great change is that political society is perhaps more just, but less wondrous, less diverse, and less free. The political implications of this last fact are most interesting. Could it be that the loss of the exceptional human being means also a loss of human freedom in general, either as its loss of the highest exemplar in the exceptional individual, or even as the vanishing of a type—the free human being—from the face of the earth? Tocqueville suggests that without human greatness—without extraordinary political leaders and captains, longterm cultural goals, and collective aspirations—human political life degenerates. As in Shakespeare, human greatness remains a problem for the political community, even as the progress of democracy has theoretically made the political community more open to all types of human beings.

Tocqueville led me to Nietzsche—a fierce, riddlesome, troubling, and extraordinary philosopher whose critique of modern culture shares much with Tocqueville in substance if not in style. I found that Nietzsche’s central concern is the great human being and the problem of human greatness in the modern age. In my readings of *Untimely Meditations*, *Human, All Too Human*, *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*, it became clear to me that one of Nietzsche’s chief anxieties about the modern democratic age is the possibility he sees that all that is high, noble, and beautiful in human beings might be reduced down to a level beyond even animals—and from this loss of humanity, who will remain that can confront the great crises of meaninglessness in our time? Nietzsche’s response to the modern age and his visions for human greatness pose interpretive problems, however. I had to carefully consider: Does he call for a radical global tyranny, for amorality? Or is there some way in which Nietzsche’s vision of human greatness can, guided by the limits and possibilities of democracy as understood by Tocqueville, find a new flourishing in our age without the need for gruesome oppression and pitilessness alien to us as good human beings and citizens? I hope to explore such a question in my Honors Project.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Paul Franco

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