Had Machiavelli never lived or written, Shakespeare’s theatre would probably have been little different from what it is now. This is not to say that he ignored Machiavelli, or that he had only the barest knowledge or understanding of him. On the contrary, Shakespeare’s plays are suffused with Machiavellianism, and the difficult thing for the commentator is to decide where to start an investigation, and once embarked, just what to leave out. For much of what goes by the name of Machiavelli, the single-minded pursuit of power without regard to conventional morality, lends itself so obviously to themes of dramatic conflict that it would be astonishing never to have seen it enacted. But given that Machiavelli had already established a reputation for such things, it is inevitable that his name would be invoked. We might begin with the most melodramatic instances. Shakespeare makes his own references to the name Machiavelli in three different places: in Henry VI, Part 3, where Gloucester speaks boldly of preparing “to set the murd’rous Machiavel to school,” and earlier in Henry VI, Part 1, where a further suggestion of Machiavellian ruthlessness occurs. In a furious exchange with her English accusers, Joan la Pucelle, after claiming to be a virgin, and now facing death by fire, admits she is with child and gives the name of the father:

Joan You are deceived; my child is none of his:
It was Alençon that enjoyed my love.

York Alençon! that notorious Machiavel!
It dies, and if it had a thousand deaths.

(5.4.72–4)

Finally, in so light and amiable a comedy as The Merry Wives of Windsor, the character of the Host is able to invoke the name as an established synonym of shrewd practice:

Host Peace, I say! hear mine host of the Garter.
Am I politic, am I subtle? am I a Machiavel?

(MWW 3.1.84–5)
The host uses the word “politic,” which occurs regularly as the substantive “policy,” and gives it the meaning that it generally carried for Elizabethans: “subtle,” or “tricky.” Policy as statecraft inevitably connoted slyness with regard to one’s operations. Another word would be the all-important “dissembling.” As for the allusion that occurs in *Henry VI, Part III*, contemporary audiences would have had their memories revived of the Duke of Alençon’s courtship of Elizabeth in 1579, an occasion which drove Sir Philip Sidney into temporary exile for publicly opposing the match. This of course was not that Alençon, who had lived 150 years previously; but in addition to the attempt at marriage (Alençon was the Queen’s last serious suitor), it would have brought back images of the decade of the 1570s, including the notorious Massacre of Saint Bartholomew, which had alarming Machiavellian associations via the Medici family, themselves recently married into the French throne (see below).

Shakespeare’s Machiavelli could of course be second-hand, as he doubtless took his cue from Marlowe’s famous Prologue to the *Jew of Malta*, spoken by a figure listed as “Machevill,” although “Machiavel,” the form used unvaryingly by Shakespeare in all three usages, seems to have had its own separate currency. The crookback Richard, duke of Gloucester, flamboyantly villainous, gloating in his wickedness, derives much of his theatrical glamour from Marlowe’s model. Both Barabas and Gloucester are outsiders, suspected, even hated, by those around them, and each character, in pursuing his own ends, is motivated by a feeling of vengefulness. Barabas is a Jew on the edge of the Christian community in Malta. Gloucester is a member of the royal family, even brother to the throne, but his liminality is ensured by his appearance, which causes Queen Margaret to denounce him as an “elvish-marked, abortive, rooting-hog/...The slave of nature and the son of hell” (1.3.225–27), all of which determines him, as he himself puts it, “to prove a villain” (1.1.30). As Mario Praz long ago pointed out, such extreme, vengeful characters stem from a Senecan tradition, to which Machiavellianism merely provides a novel twist. If you are looking for a serious application—or comprehension—of Machiavelli, then you will not find it here.¹