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*POPULISM AND POWER: ENCOUNTERING 'HISTORY' IN
SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS TODAY*

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ABSTRACT

This study will explore how Shakespeare's interest in politics is very much evident in his plays, most notably the Roman plays. His political standpoints resonate with audiences and readers today, who are faced with eroding liberal democracy and rampant populism. This study will thus also connect Shakespeare's political ideas (often prompted by the succession crisis of Elizabeth I, underpinned by the Catholic/Protestant divide) with the worldwide crisis in leadership in the 21st century – and in so doing will underscore Shakespeare's relevance to current political debates.

In Chapter 1, I will indicate the political phenomena to be studied: populism, republicanism, and democracy, both past and present – focusing on the contemporary enactment of these terms. Chapter 2 will examine the politics of Shakespeare's age, such as the opposing concepts of hierarchy vs egalitarianism, monarchy vs republicanism, militarism vs pacifism and nationalism vs cosmopolitanism, as well as the Catholic/Protestant conflict at the heart of this era. I will interrogate some of Shakespeare's English history plays, which reflect many of the political ideas that may be extrapolated from these plays. Chapter 3 comprises the four Roman plays, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* (in the order in which they were written), which will be examined in terms of the political concepts that they present. Chapter 4 moves to contemporary times and focuses on the impact of the many stage and film productions of the Roman plays, especially those that have presented the plays from a more political slant.

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CHAPTER ONE

In assessing Shakespeare's global political relevance, it is necessary to examine the concept of populism: both its progression through the ages and its resurgence in the twenty first century. It is also pertinent to explore the nature of democracy and the different types of this political system, such as liberal democracy, in addition to neoliberalism - from which populism diverges. In addition, some scholars see the term 'illiberal democracy' (coined by Fareed Zakaria, 1997) as concomitant with the concept of populism; an exploration of liberal democracy's polar opposite will be included in this chapter. As my study examines Shakespeare's Roman plays primarily, an analysis of the concept of Republicanism and its relationship with democracy is necessary.

Populism has become a much-used political term in the twenty first century, attributed to both left and right of the political spectrum. A populist is generally defined as a politician or other person who claims to support the interests of the ordinary people. Political science scholars are mostly in agreement that Cas Mudde's definition of the concept is the most dominant one: 'By a wide margin, Mudde is now the populism scholar most likely to be cited or interviewed by journalists.'¹ As Mudde is widely accepted as the leading authority on the definition and nature of populism, I will base my discussion here, largely, on the major tenets of his argument. In 'The Populist Zeitgeist' (2004) he states:

I define populism as *an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people. Populism, so defined, has two opposites: elitism and pluralism.* Elitism is populism's mirror-image: it shares its Manichean worldview, but wants politics to be an expression of the views of the moral elite, instead of the amoral people.²

Mudde describes these two groups as homogenous within themselves although 'antagonistic', in that they are in constant opposition to each other, having conflicting ideas that are unlikely to be reconciled. For example, the 'elites' (the wealthy, landowning class of a society or the ruling establishment) would focus on property rights and protection of their own privileges, whereas the 'pure people' would be more concerned with political rights

¹ Baker, Peter, C. 'We the people: the battle to define populism.' *The Guardian UK*. (10 Jan 2019).

² Mudde, Cas. 'The Populist Zeitgeist'. *Government and Opposition Volume 39, Issue 4*, Cambridge University Press (2004): 541 – 563.

(‘pure’ being a reference to the supposedly uncorrupted nature of the support base). The aforementioned interests of these two particular groups are outlined by Mukand and Rodrik their 2016 study.³

Mudde admits that defining ‘the people’ is a very difficult task⁴. It seems to encompass the support base of populist parties, which vary from country to country or from one political party to another. Some leaders also have strange contradictions within their support bases. For example, Brazil’s Bolsonaro is supported by the military, big business and the conservative agrarian sector of the country. Donald Trump is mainly supported by the white conservative working class and certain sectors of big business (big pharma, coal mining and oil mainly). According to Mudde’s definition, some sectors of these support bases should be in opposition to each other, for example Big Pharma and the white working class would be classed respectively as ‘elites’ and ‘the people.’ Boris Johnson’s support base (despite the Tories traditionally winning their support from the establishment) is garnered from the conservative white working-class voter, mostly located in the industrial north of England.

What all of these sectors have in common, despite their class differences, is a belief in conservative values. Conservative values as attributed to populist groups are often used interchangeably with ‘traditional’ values. The central tenets of this worldview are a perpetuation of religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, white and male supremacy as well as a high degree of intolerance for people outside the group. Perhaps this attribute could be used to define ‘the people’. Populist leaders often tout the phrase ‘traditional values’, where they hearken back to a time when their societies were homogeneous. The anti-immigrant sentiments seen in all populist-led countries attest to this view. Donald Trump’s wall and Brexit’s apparent aim of keeping immigrants out are applicable here, a view supported by William Galston, who writes: ‘Post-election analyses show that concerns about immigration largely drove the Brexit referendum, the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the gains of far-right parties across Europe’.⁵

³ Mukand, Sharun and Rodrik, Dani. *The Political Economy of Liberal Democracy*. University of Warwick and Harvard University (June 2016: Revised 2017): 12.

⁴ Mudde, C. (2004): 455.

⁵ Galston, William. ‘The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy’. *The Journal of Democracy*, Volume 29, (April 2018): 8. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-populist-challenge-to-liberal-democracy/>

The 'traditional values', often Christian-based (mostly fundamentalist) and nationalistic in character, espoused by these leaders are based on an inherent suspicion of science. Populist leaders are notable climate-change deniers, an assertion exemplified by Bolsonaro's burning of the Amazon forests to make way for industry and Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Accord. The Covid 19 crisis brought these anti-science views into sharp relief. Johnson's, Trump's and Bolsonaro's slow responses and initial denial of the seriousness of the pandemic had catastrophic results in all of their countries, particularly the US.

Further to Mudde's definition: the two opposing sides, 'elites' and 'the people', in spite of this 'antagonism', would still operate within a framework of democracy (ie both would support an elected government). However, in the case of a 'populist' government, which would support 'the people', there is usually a charismatic leader or 'strongman'. This kind of leader usually dominates the party, with little tolerance for dissent – either from his own party or the electorate. Donald Trump is an example of this kind of leader – this intolerance of dissent was particularly noteworthy during his impeachment trial, where Republicans (except for one) were too afraid to vote against him. It is also evident in the Covid 19 crisis, in which he made short shrift of journalists who asked probing questions (questions that are the norm in a liberal democracy). He also (in the week of April 6 to 9th, 2020) fired two top officials who he felt were insufficiently loyal to him. These two ousted officials formed part of a litany of firings. Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey are similar in this respect. Despite being elected leaders, they are extremely intolerant of dissent and imprison journalists on a regular basis. America has checks and balances in its constitution, which compels Donald Trump to tolerate journalists to a certain degree. The worst that they can expect from him is a public haranguing.

In a true 'antagonism', neither side sees the merit in the other – an 'us and them' mindset is uppermost. Their respective interests are diametrically opposed to each other and can only be met through a compromise, or 'consensus', a concept that informs many democracies around the world today, but is vehemently opposed by populists.

Mudde's mention of the 'Manichean worldview' refers to the 'black and white' standpoint on political issues held by 'elites' and the 'pure people'. The 'antagonistic' relationship between these two groups emerges from this particular worldview. The conflict surrounding taxes in the US could serve as an example: big business comprises part of the 'elites' and they

would lobby for tax cuts, whereas the working class ('the people') would be more concerned with tax benefits as a result of tax increases. However, the contradiction here, is that Donald Trump's support base comprises both of these groups as he promised to look after both of their interests. For example, he promised a return to traditional manufacturing such as coal and steel, which would appeal to both industry barons as well as blue collar workers. Boris Johnson has embraced similar policies by appealing to the coal and steel heartland of England's North. Big business is not identified as an 'elite' according to the white working class; instead, in the US for example, the intellectual elites of the Democratic party as exemplified by Hillary Clinton fulfil this role.

Bolsonaro, Trump and Johnson have common characteristics in their support bases: white, working-class males. They are not college educated, they feel a sense of being marginalised and they resent other groups for gaining benefits they feel should be exclusively reserved for themselves. Professor Joan C. Williams, author of *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*, writes in the Harvard Business Review:

Manly dignity is a big deal for working-class men, and they're not feeling that they have it. Trump promises a world free of political correctness and a return to an earlier era, when men were men and women knew their place.⁶

Williams cites further examples to support the view that the white working class in the US sees elites as being the college-educated segment of society rather than 'big business':

One little-known element of that gap is that the white working class (WWC) resents professionals but admires the rich. Class migrants (white-collar professionals born to blue-collar families) report that 'professional people were generally suspect' and that managers are college kids 'who don't know shit about how to do anything but are full of ideas about how I have to do my job,' said Alfred Lubrano in *Limbo*. Barbara Ehrenreich recalled in 1990 that her blue-collar dad 'could not say the word *doctor* without the virtual prefix *quack*. Lawyers were *shysters*...and professors were without exception *phonies*.' Annette Lareau found tremendous resentment against teachers, who were perceived as condescending and unhelpful.⁷

⁶ Williams, Joyce, C. (2016) 'What so many People Don't Get About the US Working Class'. *Harvard Business Review*. (March/April 2020): 1. <https://hbr.org/2016/11/what-so-many-people-dont-get-about-the-u-s-working-class>.

⁷ Williams, JC. (2020): 2.

Williams sees this group as being marginalised and left behind by the present political establishment and that Donald Trump tapped into this feeling of being lost. While the very poor receive benefits, the lower middle class (which she sees as a better description of the white working class) do not – referring specifically to health insurance as an example. This resentment is exacerbated by the fact that the middle class pays for these benefits in the form of taxes. She believes that their feeling of being marginalised goes beyond racism and is ignored by politicians at their peril. However, the first extract from her article, cited here, makes reference to ‘when women knew their place’, which flies in the face of her statement that their grievances go beyond racism (or in this case, sexism). One can extrapolate from this tell-tale phrase, that this group would like to return to a time when white males exerted their hegemony over women and people of colour.

William Galston’s essay ‘The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy’ is also useful in analysing the rise of populism. He believes that ‘economic dislocation and demographic changes have triggered a demand for strong leaders.’⁸ Most developed countries run on an educated meritocracy and uneducated citizens are feeling marginalised and as a result are turning to populism. He refers to David Goodhart, a British analyst who supports his views:

Democratic citizenries are being divided into ‘Anywheres’ (individuals whose identities are professional and who can use their skills in many places, at home and abroad) and ‘Somewheres’ (individuals whose identities are tightly bound to particular places). A college degree, it turns out, not only expands economic opportunities but also reshapes an individual’s entire outlook.⁹

Galston is therefore emphasising the divide created by a lack of education. The ‘Anywheres’ are college educated, which makes them more employable and versatile. The consequent mobility and empowerment of this group would enable them to have a more flexible outlook. Whereas the ‘Somewheres’ have limited skills, causing them to be desperate for employment. Their lack of empowerment makes them turn to politicians who make extravagant promises to ‘save’ them. They see liberal democracy as failing them and with liberals’ more lenient stance on immigration they feel that the jobs that they are entitled to are being given away to immigrants.

⁸ Galston, W. ‘The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy’. *The Journal of Democracy*, Volume 29 (April 2018): 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Galston reinforces the link between this mass migration and the anti-immigrant sentiments at the heart of all right leaning populist parties:

The United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union all failed to deal with waves of immigration in ways that commanded public support. Not only did immigrants compete with long-time inhabitants for jobs and social services, they were also seen as threatening established cultural norms and public safety.¹⁰

The attitudes of the ‘somewheres’ as described in the previous paragraphs have hardened over the years, but can be traced back to the nineteenth century. As explained by Anton Jäger in his essay, ‘The Myth of Populism’¹¹, modern-day populism can be traced back to the early 1890s, where it originated in the US, beginning as a grouping of alliances of disgruntled farmers and industrial workers, angry with politicians and wealthy suppliers who exploited them and controlled commodity markets. These alliances evolved into the People’s Party in 1892. They advocated the nationalising of the railway system and a ‘democratised’ federal government. Initially they tried to unite black and white tenant farmers. Under the leadership of a Georgia plantation scion, Thomas E. Watson, the populists were at times inclusive of minorities and at times not. Their activities proved that ‘an exclusionary and an inclusionary populism could easily exist side by side.’¹² Progressive and Marxist historians of the 1920s and 1940s saw this movement in a positive light: the populists were the last bastion against corporate capitalism.

Jäger sees populism and liberal democracy as incompatible. He cites Barack Obama, who gives his own view of populism, believing it to be a type of servant-leadership wherein the leader is focused on social justice for ordinary people, as akin to liberal democracy – the idea of a leader serving the people who follow him. He sees Donald Trump’s version of populism as a phenomenon better labelled as xenophobic or nativist; just an expedient to win votes:

You know, the reason I ran in 2008, and the reason I ran again, and the reason even after I leave this office I will continue to work in some capacity in public office is because I care

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 7

¹¹ Jäger, Anton. ‘The Myth of Populism’. *Jacobin Magazine* (January 2018): 4.

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/populism-douglas-hofstadter-donald-trump-democracy>

¹² *Ibid*.

about people and want to make sure every kid in America has the same opportunities I had....

Now I suppose that makes me a 'populist.' Now, somebody else, who has never shown any regard for workers, has never fought on behalf of social justice issues, who has, in fact, worked against economic opportunity for workers, for ordinary people — they don't suddenly become 'populist' because they say something controversial in order to win votes. That's not the measure of populism. That's nativism, or xenophobia — or worse, it's just cynicism....

I would advise everybody to be careful about suddenly attributing to whoever pops up at a time of economic anxiety the label that they're 'populist.'¹³

Modern populist leaders position themselves as 'servant leaders' as Obama has described above, cementing their appeal with gullible voters. The global proliferation of populist right-wing parties, such as those mentioned in earlier paragraphs, occurred in the past ten years, with possibly The Great Recession of 2008 as their trigger. However, the issues underlying their rise go beyond simple economics. The political instability in North Africa and parts of the Middle East started with the 'Arab Spring' of 2010. Civil war in Syria and Yemen a few years later also contributed to the mass migration of refugees from these regions to Europe, the UK and the United States. Jäger mentions historian Richard Hofstadter, writing in the 1950s:

As Hofstadter saw it, populists exemplified the 'paranoid style in American politics,' with mad ravings against the 'money power' and a proclivity for racial phobias. Together with Cold War intellectuals like Daniel Bell and Seymour Martin Lipset, Hofstadter drew a straight line from big-P Populism to American McCarthyism, arguing that both traditions share the same pedigree.¹⁴

This opinion is in keeping with Trump's style of populism — although Obama's input on the matter highlights the different slant that Americans in general have on populism. Their constitution begins with 'We the people...' and many Americans, like Obama, see populism through a more egalitarian lens. Europe, owing to populism having its roots in

¹³ Jäger, A. 'The Myth of Populism.' *Jacobin Magazine*. (January, 2018): 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Nazism and Fascism with the advent of Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s, has a more suspicious, fearful view of populism:

Going much further back into the past, one may note that the Republic of Ancient Rome was established in 509 BCE when Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, a cruel tyrant, was overthrown by an internal revolt. Instead of reinstating their king, the Romans replaced him with two consuls who were elected annually. Rome at that time was divided into two classes, the patricians and the plebeians. These two strata of Roman society were the equivalent of the 'elites' and 'the people' respectively. From their conflicting interests ensued a 200-year political struggle and as a result, an innovative political system needed to be established in order to cater for the interests of these two groups.¹⁵ The senate consisted of patricians and was meant to act in an advisory capacity while the plebeians were represented in a number of popular assemblies. Although representation was meant to be sovereign for all people, the senate held sway owing to the wealth and prestige of its members.

Populism in Ancient Rome, in keeping with Obama's opinion, was more egalitarian in its outlook. A notable example is Publius Clodius 'Pulcher'. He was born into a patrician family but turned his back on his privileged background, becoming the violent leader of a populist faction. He aimed to introduce radical reforms in the interests of the common people (Plebeians) of Rome. Some of these included laws making the distribution of grain in the city tax free¹⁶. The political system of that time was a balance of senators and plebeians, who were represented by the tribunes. Prior to Clodius there were the Gracchi brothers who, although officially plebeian, came from an 'old' family. Their father held various political offices and their mother was a patrician. They also attempted to push forward reforms that would help the plebeians, such as redistribution of patrician-owned land and subsidised grain for each citizen of Rome. Both were assassinated by patricians – for their pioneering political thinking, which threatened the privileges of the elites. They were accused of demagoguery and attempting to manipulate the masses for their own advantage; however, there is scant evidence that their motives were not altruistic.

¹⁵ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. 'Roman Republic.' *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (June 3, 2021). <https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Republic>.

¹⁶ Bufacchi, Vittorio. *Populism and the Politically Excluded: Lessons from Ancient Rome*. Series: 'Populism and Democracy'. Global-e. Volume 11. Issue 29 (2018). <https://globalejournal.org/global-e/may-2018/populism-and-politically-excluded-lessons-ancient-rome>.

From these two Roman examples and those of the last decade, it can be extrapolated that the rise of populism is almost always a 'top-down'¹⁷ movement. This means that a populist ascendancy to power is driven by a strong leader, rather than the mobilisation of the masses from below. The Gracchi brothers and Clodius, although they were on the margins of the elites (the patricians), were firmly aligned with the people (the plebeians). This is a very different scenario to the present. Although today's populist leaders claim to identify with 'the people', they are very much part of the elites. This is especially true of Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Vladimir Putin, with Jair Bolsonaro a notable exception (he comes from an Italian immigrant working class family). According to Vittorio Bufacchi, populists ascend to power through their own machinations:

Contrary to what is generally believed, populism is not a bottom-up political movement, the desperate voice of the marginalized masses, the political expression of a final, radical, democratic push by those who for too long have been excluded and are not going to take it any longer. Instead, populism is the brainchild of the elite. That's how it was in Ancient Rome, and the same is true today.¹⁸

Unlike the Gracchi brothers and Clodius, 21st century populist leaders have an agenda of power while 'the people' are convenient pawns in their quest for political dominance. This 'top-down' quest for power pits one elite (the populist leader) against the establishment elites. 'The people' are simply a convenient vehicle for the populist leader to be elected into power. This agenda of power is exemplified by Donald Trump's exploiting of his base on January 6 2021 by inciting them to march to the Capitol, ostensibly to 'cheer on' the senators protesting the electoral college vote, but ultimately to aid him in overturning the 2020 election results.

Once a populist is brought to power, very few promises are delivered: this is proved by the policies and laws that they put into place once they are in power. Very few of these benefit 'the people', but merely extend the authority of the populist leader.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In keeping with the aforementioned ideas, Fareed Zakaria sees populism as an ‘illiberal democracy’, the inversion of ‘liberal democracy’.¹⁹ The notion of ‘liberal democracy’, being one type of democracy, needs to be analysed in some depth, before ‘illiberal democracy’ can be examined successfully.

The concept is based on the ‘two-strand theory of democracy’²⁰: liberalism and democracy. Democracy in its purest form, according to Aristotle, ‘exists whenever those who are free and are not well-off, being the majority, are in sovereign control of government.’²¹ This kind of democracy is simply majority rule with no checks and balances for individual rights. The term ‘liberalism’ changes democracy of the majority to a democracy that also makes provision for individual rights, minority rights and the rule of law. However, Margaret Canovan further believes that the ‘two-strand’ theory of liberal democracy is an uneasy combination as the two terms (‘liberal’ and ‘democracy’) are at odds with each other.

Most Western democracies are liberal in character and there is a Western democratic view, especially amongst the proponents of Fukuyama and his ‘End of History’ theory²², that democracy is the ‘default position’ for global political systems. Even those who disagree with him, would not support undemocratic political systems. This view is borne out by the fact that even the most virulent dictatorships attempt a veneer of democracy; the rigged elections of Belarus are a case in point, as are the Malian coup plotters who promised to hold new elections. After the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and others (with their concomitant brutality), there is a general reluctance to return to these systems. Even populists work within a democratic system (or the appearance of a democratic system) and accept this as the norm.

The high degree of legitimacy that democracy enjoys can also be observed in the paucity of support in established democracies for antidemocratic movements and regimes elsewhere. During the twentieth century, there were significant sources of support in Western public opinion, especially among academics and intellectuals, not only for Marxism, but for Stalin’s Soviet Union, for Mao’s China, for Castro’s Cuba, and for the

¹⁹ Zakaria, Fareed. ‘The Rise of Illiberal Democracy’. *Foreign Affairs* (Nov/Dec 1997): 24.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20048274>.

²⁰ Canovan, Margaret. ‘Populism for Political Theorists?’ *Journal of Political Ideologies*. Volume 9, issue 3 (2004): 242.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjpi20/9/3?nav=tocList>.

²¹ Aristotle. *The Politics*, trans. Saunders, T. (London: Penguin Classics, 1981): 245.

²² Fukuyama, Francis. ‘The Future of History: Can Liberal Democracy Survive the Decline of the Middle Class?’ *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 91, no. 1, *JSTOR* (2012): 53–61. www.jstor.org/stable/23217147.

Sandinistas' Nicaragua. In the democratic world today, open backing for the regimes of Russia, China, or Iran is rarely to be found.²³

To illustrate this point further, the renowned, previously Marxist political scientists, Mouffe and Laclau, have revised their views on Marxism and have adopted a Post-Marxist position, realising the lack of homogeneity in the present-day class struggle. The two academics' works are definitive regarding modern political thought. Their most acclaimed work, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, is important in this regard. In an interview on the theories expressed in their book, Mouffe describes their approach as 'Post-Marxist' as Marxism was unable to grasp the specificity of the various social movements that arose from the 1960s and a new theory was needed to fill the vacuum created by a political move to the right. She states:

The political objective was to reformulate the socialist project so as to provide an answer to the crisis of left-wing thought both in its communist and in its social democratic versions. This crisis was, in our view, due in part to the growing importance of the new social movements which had been emerging since the '60s and whose specificity neither Marxism nor social democracy was able to grasp. Hence our theoretical aim, which was to develop an approach that would illuminate the specificity of movements which were not class-based and could therefore not be apprehended merely in terms of economic exploitation.²⁴

Mouffe's view on the political move to the right is echoed by Zakaria. His view on populism as 'illiberal democracy' adds to the discussion on the nature of populism and where it is positioned on the political spectrum. He sees 'illiberal democracy' as a majoritarian democracy that is veering away from liberal democracy, to the right, in accordance with Mouffe. Leaders are duly elected by 'the people', but once in power, their policies and law making become more authoritarian in nature. This is exemplified by Vladimir Putin's recent passing of laws in parliament that entrench his position and enable him to cling to power for much longer. Zakaria also gives the example of Donald Trump:

²³ Plattner, Marc,F. 'Democracy's Past and Future: Populism, Pluralism and Liberal Democracy'. *Journal of Democracy* Volume 21, no1. (John Hopkins University Press, Jan 2010): 82. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Plattner-21-1.pdf>.

²⁴ Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London; New York: Verso. 2013): 129 -146.

But there's no question that he's a populist, and the danger with this kind of raw populism is that it wants to create too direct a connection between popular passions and public policy. The whole point of liberal democracy is to create a system that reflects and addresses popular passions but also allows for some deliberation, for some consideration of liberal values like the rights of minorities and free expression and private property. These values cannot be overridden by popular passions, and one of the things you see consistently from Trump is the feeling that if he finds something that hits a nerve with the public, like the ban on Muslims, the fact that it may be unconstitutional or deeply illiberal doesn't seem to bother him at all. This is very troubling, to say the least.²⁵

To further understand populism, its relationship with liberal democracy and the connection of all of these concepts with Shakespearean texts, it is necessary to examine democracy and its connection with Republicanism.

In modern democracies or republics, these terms both imply that the majority is represented. However, in a republic there are laws in place guaranteeing the rights of individuals and minorities. In a pure democracy, it is simply rule of the majority, without any checks and balances for minorities. As Robert Longley argues, the United States, like most modern nations, is neither a pure republic nor a pure democracy. Instead, it is a hybrid democratic republic, meaning that the constitution protects minorities. The electoral college system is an example of republican characteristics, ensuring that less populated states have as much say as more populous ones. Pure democratic values are included in the voting processes at state and senate level, where simple majorities are counted²⁶

Another term in the lexicon of democracy is the 'two-strand' form of democracy. Populism arose out of this hybrid form, which Mouffe describes as 'the democratic paradox':

I would also want to put emphasis on the distinction between two aspects: on one side, democracy as a form of rule, that is, the principle of the sovereignty of the people; and the on the other side, the symbolic framework within which this democratic rule is

²⁵ Illing, Sean. 'Fareed Zakaria made a scary prediction about democracy in 1997 – and it's coming true'. *Vox*, 4 July 2017. <https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/1/18/14250364/democracy-liberalism-donald-trump-populism-fareed-zakaria-europe-fascism>.

²⁶ Longley, Robert. 'Republic vs. Democracy: What Is the Difference?' *ThoughtCo* (Feb. 11, 2020). <https://www.thoughtco.com/republic-vs-democracy-4169936>.

exercised. The novelty of modern democracy, what makes it properly 'modern', is that, with the advent of the 'democratic revolution', the old democratic principle that 'power should be exercised by the people' emerges again, but this time within a symbolic framework informed by the liberal discourse, with its strong emphasis on the value of individual liberty and on human rights.²⁷

She believes that governments who ignore the popular sovereignty aspect of democracy do so at their peril. In order to deal with this paradox, they need to come to terms with it, if the rise of right-wing populist parties is to be prevented.

In South Africa, populism is a complex phenomenon, which cannot be neatly divided into left and right. In 2008, President Thabo Mbeki was 're-called' at the ANC's Polokwane conference, in favour of Jacob Zuma, who was more popular with the masses. W.R. Terblanche elaborates on Mbeki's political failures, which led to the rise of Zuma:

Discontent built up against Mbeki's centrist elitism. With unhappiness against Mbeki's economic policies mounting within the ANC, as well as his perceived unwillingness to engage with relevant stakeholders such as trade unions on economic policies, ANC branches became the breeding ground for Populism. The much-touted 'battle for the soul of the ANC' began here.²⁸

Jacob Zuma, like Donald Trump, survived numerous scandals and only when the worst excesses of his Gupta-partnered state capture became too egregious to ignore, was he forced to step down. In 2021, he faces the Zondo Commission (established in order to put forward recommendations on action to be taken regarding state capture). To date he has refused to appear before this commission. Zuma is exploiting the 'man of the people' guise that he has previously used, to position his followers. Most of his supporters do not believe the charges that have been levelled against him, in the same way that most of Donald Trump's followers believe that he won the November 2020 election. Both of these leaders are part of the elites, yet claim to protect their followers from them.

²⁷ Mouffe, Chantal. *The Democratic Paradox*. (London; New York: Verso, 2000): 6-7.

²⁸ Terblanche, Wayne, R. 'An Analysis of Populism and Human Rights in South Africa'. (MA Thesis. University of the Free State, 2018): 71.
<https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11660/10245/TerblancheWR.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

Another pertinent concept is 'neoliberalism', which may be the root cause of global disaffection with politics and why voters worldwide are turning to right-wing populism. As with 'populism', it is a very difficult term to define. Simply put, it is an ideology associated with a free-market economy, where there is minimal state intervention, de-regulation, with an emphasis on competition, privatisation and an erosion of state welfare provisions. This policy forms the cornerstone of most economies of the world, and the underlying premises of this ideology seem to have permeated all aspects of society. It is very much based on the Darwinian principle of survival of the fittest, supposedly based on meritocracy. The most able and competitive will succeed but many will be left behind.

George Monbiot adds to this view:

Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that 'the market' delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning. Attempts to limit competition are treated as inimical to liberty. Tax and regulation should be minimised, public services should be privatised. The organisation of labour and collective bargaining by trade unions are portrayed as market distortions that impede the formation of a natural hierarchy of winners and losers. Inequality is recast as virtuous: a reward for utility and a generator of wealth, which trickles down to enrich everyone. Efforts to create a more equal society are both counterproductive and morally corrosive. The market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve. We internalise and reproduce its creeds. The rich persuade themselves that they acquired their wealth through merit, ignoring the advantages – such as education, inheritance and class – that may have helped to secure it. The poor begin to blame themselves for their failures, even when they can do little to change their circumstances.²⁹

Neoliberalism manifests itself in almost all aspects of modern life, from education to healthcare.

²⁹ Monbiot, George. 'Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems'. *The Guardian*. UK, 15 April 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>.

Too many people in the US, South Africa and world-wide are being left behind and in their despair are turning to populist leaders, whom they see as their 'saviours'. Unfortunately, they are not sufficiently well-informed to see that these leaders are unscrupulous and have their own agendas.

The underclass, who follow populist leaders is also exploited by social media. The 'echo-chamber' effect ensures that the only information that they are exposed to, is one-dimensional and supports their own views. Populist leaders have ruthlessly spread their own propaganda, exploiting the naïve and the gullible. Satirist Sasha Baron Cohen, in his speech to the Anti-Defamation League, elaborates on this issue:

Today around the world, demagogues appeal to our worst instincts. Conspiracy theories once confined to the fringe are going mainstream. It's as if the Age of Reason – the era of evidential argument – is ending, and now knowledge is de-legitimised and scientific consensus is dismissed. Democracy, which depends on shared truths, is in retreat, and autocracy, which depends on shared lies, is on the march. Hate crimes are surging, as are murderous attacks on religious and ethnic minorities. What do all these dangerous trends have in common? I'm just a comedian and an actor, not a scholar. But one thing is pretty clear to me. All this hate and violence is being facilitated by a handful of internet companies that amount to the greatest propaganda machine in history. The greatest propaganda machine in history. Think about it. Facebook, YouTube and Google, Twitter and others – they reach billions of people. The algorithms these platforms depend on deliberately amplify the type of content that keeps users engaged – stories that appeal to our baser instincts and that trigger outrage and fear. It's why YouTube recommended videos by the conspiracist Alex Jones billions of times. It's why fake news outperforms real news, because studies show that lies spread faster than truth. And it's no surprise that the greatest propaganda machine in history has spread the oldest conspiracy theory in history – the lie that Jews are somehow dangerous. As one headline put it, 'Just Think What Goebbels Could Have Done with Facebook.'³⁰

The racism and prejudices of the working class, to echo Galston and Williams, are amplified by social media. Their worst fears are tapped into by politicians and others, fuelling their

³⁰ Baron Cohen, Sacha. Speech to Anti-Defamation League. Published in *The Guardian UK*, 2019.
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/22/sacha-baron-cohen-facebook-propaganda>.

support for populism. Government regulation of social media is clearly needed for more objective dissemination of information. Relinquishing of 'white privilege' and patriarchy is a more difficult problem to solve. Fairer economic policies (those that don't favour the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor) could contribute to a way out of this morass, as could more equitable education policies.

Currently, liberal democracy is being dominated by neoliberalism, to the extent that we now have oligarchical democracy (collusion between big business and politicians). The attraction of populist leaders for ordinary voters world-wide shows no sign of diminishing, flourishing especially in societies where inequality is most stark. As will be demonstrated in further chapters, Shakespeare addresses the Issue of oligarchies in many of his plays, notably in *Coriolanus*, where the play opens with the patricians being accused of hoarding all of the corn in the city, at the expense of the poor.

A one-size-fits-all model of democracy, does not work for all countries as Mouffe has pointed out. Shakespeare presents different forms of governance in his plays, giving credence to a 'mixed' government. (This term will be analysed more fully in further chapters). Although he was not dismissive of monarchy (this would have been a perilous undertaking) his plays do offer the audience different forms of rule. This is especially evident in the opening scene of *Titus Andronicus*, where Bassianus, Saturninus and Marcus Andronicus all present different forms of governance in their endorsement of a candidate for emperor.

Echoing this Shakespearean position of different viewpoints, Mouffe states:

'Here again I agree with Schmitt that the world is a pluri-verse, not a universe. I do not believe in the existence of one single form of democracy that would provide the only legitimate, universal answer. There are many ways in which the democratic idea can be implemented according to different contexts.'³¹

Mouffe's mention of the political move to the right, because of a vacuum on the left, needs to be considered here. Political balance is achieved through 'antagonism' between left and right. More 'republican' principles would assist in this regard, where there is more

³¹ Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. (London; New York: Verso, 2013): 145.

proportionate representation by 'the people' and 'the elites.' Shakespeare illustrates this idea of tension between these two groups most fittingly in *Coriolanus*. He critiques the opposing ideas of the two groups through his portrayal of characters such as Menenius, Caius Martius and various unnamed citizens.

In *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe mentions the theory of the 'third way' where there is a blurring of political left and right into consensus at the centre. With the move to the right, populists are the only ones denouncing consensus and are promising citizens disillusioned with politics that they are the sole anti-establishment political saviours. Mouffe elaborates in *Agonistics*: 'I am really worried by the celebration of the politics of 'consensus at the centre' that exists today. I feel very strongly that such a post-political zeitgeist is creating a favourable terrain for the rise of right-wing populism'. In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare's depiction of the silencing of the tribunes, Flavius and Marullus, reveals a kind of vacuum on the left, where ordinary people are denied a voice. The situation here is more complex though, with patricians like Mark Antony leaning towards Caesar and others becoming conspirators against him.

In the following chapters, this study will examine the politics of Shakespeare's age and how he wove contemporary concerns into his plays, depicting a myriad of political ideas that can in turn offer modern-day audiences much thought to draw on, as they face a world of pestilence and failed populism.

CHAPTER TWO

Shakespeare's interest in politics is borne out by his prolific chronicling of English history in dramatic form. This chapter focuses on Shakespeare's own age, but also aims to show how he delved into English history, going back more than one hundred years, to make connections between his own country's history and some of the social and political issues that were unfolding around him.

Robin Headlam Wells is of the view that to argue that 'Shakespeare shows an indifference to political questions in the histories and tragedies is to ignore the topicality of these plays. They are topical not in the sense of alluding to contemporary events but in the sense that they reflect and embody subjects of current debate. These plays are essentially political.'¹ However, I would differ with Wells' view that Shakespeare did not allude to contemporary events, as his history plays abound with examples, as will be illustrated in this chapter and elsewhere in the thesis. It seems likely that Wells meant that Shakespeare used these events as a vehicle for discussion of current debates rather than the events for their own sake. The Elizabethan and Jacobean ages were times of social conflict, political controversy and intense intellectual debate (albeit at times suppressed). Shakespeare and his English contemporaries, like their European counterparts, partook in the revival of learning, especially the return to ancient, classical writings. Political ideas expressed in these writings resonated in the debates of Shakespeare's era.

Shakespeare was well-versed in the writings of Sir Thomas Smith, Sir Thomas Elyot, Machiavelli, Thomas Starkey, Michel Montaigne – all of these writers had a profound effect on his political thought. (Montaigne's and Machiavelli's influences in particular, vis á vis *Richard II* and *Richard III* will be examined in this chapter.) John.J. Joughin adds:

In writing his plays Shakespeare had ready access to a vast archive of politically significant texts and treatises including the homespun political theory of More and Bacon, as well as contemporary histories, older chronicles and newer translations of classical texts. He also possessed an evident familiarity with European contemporaries and political thinkers such as Montaigne and Machiavelli, as well as a working knowledge of Church law and scriptural religion. Yet such is the diversity

¹ Wells, Robin Headlam. *Shakespeare, Politics and the State*. (London: Macmillan, 1986): 1.

of Shakespeare's re-workings and borrowings from this extraordinary array of source material that those in search of the articulation of a clear political thesis within the plays themselves, will remain frustrated.²

Scholars generally agree that it is virtually impossible to pin Shakespeare to a specific political stance. Hadfield underscores this by stating, 'It is unlikely that a 'smoking gun' exists that will prove that Shakespeare read republican works avidly and wished to use his plays and poetry to persuade others of the necessity of implementing his heartfelt convictions.'³ However, Shakespeare does present some pressing contemporary political matters, albeit in an oblique manner, for example the Midlands grain riots and the Enclosures Act (in *Coriolanus* and *Henry VI Part 2*). In Act 1, Scene 1 of *Coriolanus*, we are introduced to the concepts of dearth, the withholding of grain and riots as the citizens rail against Martius. David George writes of the situation in England at Shakespeare's time of writing:

'Evidence survives to show that storehouses were indeed crammed with grain. William Combe, writing from Warwick on 2 June 1608, told Robert Cecil that "the dearth of corn, the prices rising to some height, is caused partly by some that are well stored, by refraining to bring the same to the market out of a covetous conceit that corn will be dearer". A royal proclamation, also 2 June, said the same thing.'⁴

In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare puts forward both sides of the argument, showing us the views of the citizens as well as the patricians, in the form of Menenius's 'belly speech' to provoke thought and debate in his audiences. Similarly, the Enclosures Act is reflected in *Henry VI, Part 2*, with the commoners' petitioning of Gloucester against the cruel measures of Suffolk. This echoes the depopulation of rural England, when small farmers were unable to graze their livestock due to wealthy landowners' closing off of common lands. They were then forced to move to the towns.⁵

Shakespeare wrote against the backdrop of a turbulent political situation, attaining the patronage of two monarchs, yet having to live through the social and political conflict arising

² Joughin, J. Introduction to *Shakespeare and Politics*. Alexander, Catherine, ed (Cambridge, 2004): 2.

³ Hadfield, Andrew. *Shakespeare and Republicanism*. (Cambridge, 2005): 13.

⁴ George, David. 'Plutarch, insurrection and dearth in *Coriolanus*', in Alexander, Catherine., ed. *Shakespeare and Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 118, 119.

⁵ Ibid.

from the rule of both Queen Elizabeth I and, to a lesser extent, King James I. Shakespeare wrote most of his plays while King James was on the throne but the political intrigues of the court and their effect on the general populace during the reign of Elizabeth 1 drew him in.

During the time of Elizabeth's rule, religion and politics were very much intertwined. This state of affairs had been initiated by Henry VIII when, in order to facilitate his divorce, he had broken with the Catholic Church in 1534 and established the Church of England. This culminated in the passing of the Act of Supremacy followed shortly by the Treasons Act. These gave him sole rulership over the Church in England and made disavowing this treasonous.

The English monarch then replaced the Pope as head of the church, thereby marrying religious and political leadership. When Elizabeth I ascended the throne, she was seen by Catholic Europe as an illegitimate leader. The Pope justified attempts at deposition as the 'work of God' and there were many attempts to assassinate the queen, with Catholic secret agents infiltrating various social groups in England. A papal bull to this effect was Issued in 1570 and it also excommunicated Elizabeth from the Catholic Church. Elizabeth was reluctant to confront Catholic Europe, as she felt that England would be drawn into pointless, expensive conflict. This reluctance extended to her initial refusal to order the execution of her Catholic cousin, Mary Queen of Scots, although she gave in under pressure from her advisers.

However, on the home front, Elizabeth Issued a new homily, 'Agaynst Disobedience and Wylful Rebellion.'⁶ This homily entrenched the concept that rebellion was a misdeed against God and could under no circumstances be acceptable. Shakespeare's history plays, perhaps not coincidentally, have as one of their central concerns the debate as to whether a tyrannical monarch should be obeyed or rebelled against. Other common themes are the dangers of civil war and the need for good governance and political harmony. The historical distance between Shakespeare's histories and contemporary politics would absolve him from accusations of sedition, which were common at the time. Greenblatt concurs with this assertion:

⁶ Wells, R. (1986): 92.

And even when he came closer to his own world, in the remarkable sequence of history plays extending from the fourteenth-century reign of Richard II to the downfall of Richard III, Shakespeare carefully kept at least a full century between himself and the events he depicted.⁷

Censorship in England (forbidding discussion of the succession and any criticism of Queen Elizabeth) was strongly enforced with a special focus on targeting historical dramas dealing with insurrection. The vigorous intellectual and political debates taking place at the time often found an outlet in the theatre and theatre practitioners were eager to exploit this passion for discussion and airing of views, as it benefited them economically. Edmund Tilney was appointed by Queen Elizabeth in 1581 as Master of the Revels, with his job description being extended to dramatic censor.⁸ Many of Shakespeare's contemporaries found themselves arrested and their works banned or censored. A notable example is the play, *Sir Thomas More* written by Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle – with Shakespeare having a hand in its later revision. Shakespeare's *Richard II* was thought to be censored (in particular, the deposition scene) due to its uncomfortable proximity to ideas associated with Elizabeth's rule. This censorship and *Richard II*'s connection with the Essex plot will be examined further on in this chapter.

The plots against Elizabeth were relentless, resulting in a network of spies across England amidst an atmosphere of suspicion. The English defeat of the Spanish Armada (which had been sent at the behest of the pope) in 1588 was a notable victory and subsequently the Catholic threat was somewhat dimmed. This triumph over the Spanish was a source of nationalistic pride and boosted Elizabeth's fortunes at home quite considerably. However, the schism between Catholicism and Protestantism was still to cause major conflict in England, spanning decades after Reformation. During the reign of Elizabeth, this very emotive issue led to the reinforcement of strong central government, in order to contain the different factions. Medieval ideas regarding the monarch being God's representative on earth continued into the Tudor era in order to prevent dissent. These ideas regarding the monarch are based on the notions that there is one God and one head of the family so it was a natural conclusion that there should be absolute obedience to one monarch.

⁷ Greenblatt, Stephen. *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power*. (London: Vintage, 2018): 5.

⁸ Clare, Janet. 'Greater Themes for Insurrection's Arguing': Political Censorship of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage.' *The Review of English Studies*, Volume 38, no. 150, JSTOR (1987): 169–183. www.jstor.org/stable/515421.

The Chain of Being philosophy, originating from Plato and integrated into medieval thinking, embodied the idea of order, with each rank of human being or animal placed into an immutable hierarchy. Sir Thomas Elyot's works, notably *The Governor*, informed some of Shakespeare's thinking. *The Governor*, which gives advice on educating gentlemen (prospective governors), was published in 1531 and became a very popular text, going through nine editions in 50 years. Elyot had a formidable reputation as a politician and an author. Consequently, Shakespeare would have been very familiar with this work and D.T. Starnes argues for its influence on some of Shakespeare's thinking:

I may say that the plays of Shakespeare dating from about 1595 to 1609 show in thought and expression of ideas some striking agreements with parts of The Governour. These agreements are best exemplified in 2 Henry IV, Henry V, and Troilus and Cressida, plays of practically contemporary composition.⁹

Elyot especially notes the role of the commons – in keeping with this view of each person having their pre-ordained place in society. Shakespeare seemingly concurred with this idea in some of his plays: the importance of order in *Macbeth* and his portrayal of the commons in *Coriolanus*.

Paul Lombardo further argues on the Chain of Being philosophy: 'Both Bodin and Elyot wrote in support of the status quo. They used the chain of being notion to defend an already established regime.'¹⁰ According to Wells, the Chain of Being also took on a humanistic aspect:

'... the Chain of Being was not simply a static symbol of world order: for Renaissance humanists it was a dynamic image expressive of the individual's potential for either degeneration or amelioration.'¹¹

However, Machiavelli's view, opposing the Chain of Being, is also presented in many of Shakespeare's dramas:

⁹ Starnes, Dustin.T. 'Shakespeare and Elyot's *Gouverneur*'. *Studies in English*. No 7. University of Texas Press (Nov 14, 1927): 52.

¹⁰ Lombardo Paul A. 'The Great Chain of Being and the Limits to the Machiavellian Cosmos'. *Journal of Thought*. Caddo Gap Press. Volume 17, No. 1 (Spring 1982): 37-52. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40096042>.

¹¹ Wells, R. (1986): 5.

In place of a structured, regular, predictable world, Machiavelli's is ruled by the caprice of fortuna, representing chance, fate or happenstance. The most predictable feature of this personification of luck is her fickle spirit. She is a woman to be reckoned with and, like the useful courtesan who has the ear of the king, attended to.¹²

Shakespeare, in addition to the hierarchical composition of society as set out in the Chain of Being, presents a view more in keeping with Machiavelli's philosophy of humanism rather than a Christian world view. Humanism during the time of the Renaissance saw humankind as being rational and with the ability to make decisions for themselves. Concomitant with this movement was a return to the learning of the classics. In all of Shakespeare's plays, he makes it clear that his characters' actions determine their destiny. Although fate or fortune plays a role, he opposes this view within the same play, having the characters' choices and behaviour decide the outcome of their lives.

Frances Ringwood argues that the notion of republicanism is present in the works of Machiavelli and Shakespeare. In her discussion, she cites Pocock:

Pocock names the entire socio-political shift towards republicanism in quattrocento Italy 'The Machiavellian Moment' in his book of the same name (this expressed itself in England's history as the Interregnum). Not only *The Prince* but also the lesser known *Discorsi* (*The Discourses*) ushered in this moment. In these later works, an ideal republic was modelled on the republics of Ancient Rome, in which the powers of rulers could be checked through the advisory capacity of a wise senate. In Elizabethan England, this was translated to the situation at court where the queen was entreated by her male advisors to take one or another course of action in a variety of situations.¹³

Shakespeare's religious allegiances are shrouded in mystery, with some scholars being of the opinion that he was actually Catholic – as his parents spent their formative years under Catholic rule, before the advent of Henry VIII. Greenblatt argues further that Shakespeare probably attended the regular services in his Protestant parish because he never turns up on any of the lists of recusant Catholics and militant Puritans who refused to attend Anglican services. Anderson adds to the debate:

¹² Lombardo, P.A. (1982): 46.

¹³ Ringwood, Frances. Shakespeare's Mavericks and the Machiavellian Moment. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* Volume 32 (2019:) 38–48. <https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.4314/sisa.v32i1.5>.

But did he believe what he heard and recited? His works suggest that he did have faith, of a sort, but it was not a faith securely bound by either the Catholic Church or by the Church of England. By the 1590s, insofar as his could be situated in any institution at all, that institution was the theater.¹⁴

There is considerable disagreement amongst scholars as to Shakespeare's religious beliefs, which seem as difficult to gauge as his political persuasions. It must be borne in mind that despite the blurring of the lines between religion and politics in England at this time, Shakespeare presented various political ideas, but religious doctrinal debates do not make an appearance as frequently. As Greenblatt further states, Shakespeare would use 'oblique angles'¹⁵ to present the different sides of political debate. As for religion, delving into a doctrinal debate of Catholicism versus Protestantism would have been too dangerous for him, in view of the strongly anti-Catholic official policy enforced by Queen Elizabeth - but perhaps Shakespeare was not particularly interested in the two opposing doctrines. Throughout his plays, he presents a Christian world view that is common to both doctrines, even as the concept of humanism arising from renaissance thinking is evident in many of his dramas.

The first half of Queen Elizabeth's reign has often been referred to as a 'golden age' for England. Exploration by Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh saw the discovery of new territories and the establishment of new colonies. The arts flourished under her patronage and the first theatres were opened in London. She also faced off both Spain and France. However, after 1580 there was a distinct decline. Elizabeth was an ageing monarch, with her political prowess past its prime and with no heir to succeed her. Discussion of the succession crisis as well as any murmurs of dissent were severely punished. She became more out of touch with her people, relying on unscrupulous advisers, such as the Cecil faction, which had entrenched itself in the court. This coterie of advisers had the queen's ear, whereas parliament had become more distant and further removed from the decision-making process. The factionalism of the court was exacerbated by nobles trying to gain favour in the absence of a successor to Elizabeth.

¹⁴ Anderson, David. E. 'Was Shakespeare Catholic?' *Religion News Service* (April 2008).

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2008/04/25/april-25-2008-was-shakespeare-catholic/5519/>

¹⁵ Greenblatt, S. (2018): 14.

All of this jockeying for position laid the foundations for the 'Essex plot', the failed rebellion of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, once one of the queen's favourites. Elizabeth's favouritism was another factor giving impetus to all of this in-fighting. At the height of her powers, she managed deftly to play one noble off another, but this strategy had diminished quite considerably by the end of the 1580s. Her subjects lived in a country filled with uncertainty and anxiety. It is small wonder that theatre practitioners wanted to take these conversations to London's stages.

Sir Peter Wentworth, a parliamentarian, in 1576, argued for freedom of speech regarding abuses of the clergy and the succession crisis. He felt that these issues were of major importance to parliament and the country as a whole – whereas Elizabeth felt that the succession issue was her own private business. She based her argument on the 'doctrine of the queen's two bodies' wherein the queen had a private self and a public self.¹⁶ Consequently, Wentworth was sent to the Tower on numerous occasions.

When James I ascended the throne after the death of Elizabeth, he continued the political philosophy of 'absolutism', outlining his beliefs in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* and *Basiliikon Doron*, published in 1598 and 1599 respectively. He believed in the divine right of kings, a philosophy embodying the idea of the monarch as a representative of God whose subjects must follow and obey. Parliament, in his view, had a very limited role; between 1614 and 1622, James even suspended this institution. He managed to maintain a modicum of peace between the conflicting religious factions. However, he became increasingly autocratic and corrupt, favouring his own appointees and having to extricate himself from various scandals.¹⁷

When James first ascended the throne, his interest in drama came to the fore almost immediately and he commissioned a host of plays, through Shakespeare and his players especially – they then became 'The King's Men'. This ensured constant work; The King's Men also received protection from the King against increasing opposition to public theatres amongst Puritan factions.

Censorship was more relaxed under James than it had been under Elizabeth. However, Shakespeare still had to be circumspect, especially in his depiction of kings. He appears to

¹⁶ Hadfield, A. *The English Renaissance: 1500–1620*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001): 15.

¹⁷ Hadfield, A. (2001): 22.

flatter James in his depiction of Banquo in *Macbeth* (historically an ancestor of James) yet his portrayal of King Lear as a 'mad' king hardly puts the monarch in a flattering light. However, the play is set in the time when England and Scotland were joined in one country, 'Britain'. Shakespeare's homage to the notion of 'Britain', paid tribute to James's own pet subject – his proposed unification of England and Scotland.¹⁸ He styled himself as the King of Great Britain and tried to make this title a reality, but was thwarted by English and Scottish parliaments, both fearing the hegemony of the other.

According to Christopher Wortham, 'there is no doubt that the plays of Shakespeare both reflected and shaped the cultural experience of the new Jacobean court as a whole.'¹⁹ Yet Shakespeare's homage to James stopped short of outright flattery. This was never his style, as evidenced in most of his history plays, where flatterers come in for damning criticism. In Elizabeth's time, the Issues of civil war and the succession of the monarch were of great importance and were thus reflected in Shakespeare's many history plays written in this time. During the reign of King James I, Shakespeare's plays reflected many of the king's interests such as James's wish to unify England and Scotland, his belief in absolute monarchy and the divine right of kings as well as his view of himself as the new Augustus Caesar, achieving a kind of *Pax Romana*, but for England and Scotland.²⁰ It is notable that Shakespeare's only history play written in the time of James's reign is *Henry VIII* (in collaboration).

Wortham further adds to the question of Shakespeare's relationship with King James by indicating that the playwright seemed to prefer pursuing his relationship with his former patron, the Earl of Southampton, who narrowly escaped execution in the time of Elizabeth, because of his involvement in the Essex plot:

Shakespeare may not have cared greatly about royal approval beyond retaining the protective support of his patron: he was no stranger to aristocratic circles and it seems probable that he was content to sustain his long-term entree through the Earl of Southampton, who was in favour again now that there was a new monarch. Nor is there any

¹⁸ Dickson, A. 'Discovering Literature: Shakespeare & Renaissance'. *British Library* website. (2016).

<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/royal-shakespeare-a-playwright-and-his-king>.

¹⁹ Wortham, Christopher. 'Shakespeare, James I and the Matter of Britain.' (*Academic OUP* (1996): 96. <https://research-repository.uwa.edu.au/en/publications/shakespeare-james-i-and-the-matter-of-britain>.

²⁰ Wortham, C. (1996): 97.

evidence that he went to any lengths to be noticed in any other capacity than as playwright.²¹

In the following sections, I will apply the considerations introduced above to a more detailed discussion of some of the history plays.

Richard II²²

In *Richard II*, aspects of the Elizabethan political landscape intersect with the dramatic content of Shakespeare's play: there are echoes of the Essex plot in the conspiracies to overthrow Richard. Shakespeare narrowly escaped prosecution for the staging of *Richard II* on the eve of the Essex rebellion. The players escaped retribution although they had been paid by Essex and his cohorts, the rebels perhaps believing that the parallels in the story would inspire others to join the rebellion.

The play is rooted in history, with Shakespeare consulting multiple sources such as Holinshed, Hall and the Baldwin-led *Mirror for Magistrates*. Consequently, he could not be singled out for sedition by Queen Elizabeth I. Others writing similarly about Richard II were not as lucky, for example Dr John Hayward, who made the mistake of dedicating his historical text on Henry IV to the Earl of Essex. Owing to the fragile succession question, Elizabeth disapproved of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Like the other Tudors before her, she was strongly in favour of absolutism, believing that the monarch is a representative of God on earth. The 'anointed' monarch would in this way be absolved of any wrongdoing. Hadfield concurs with this view in his mention of Machiavelli's suggestion that 'religion could be used in an instrumental way to try and manipulate people into accepting the legitimate authority, however dubious.'²³ The history plays, particularly *Richard II*, made very unflattering parallels between herself and the deposed Richard. She was unduly influenced by court flatterers as was Richard and both of them lacked an heir. This latter aspect was particularly distressing to Elizabeth especially and she forbade any discussion of or allusion to this subject. The parallels were uncomfortably close enough to prompt Elizabeth's famous words: 'I am Richard II. Do ye not know that?'²⁴ Perhaps the omission of the

²¹*Ibid*, 106.

²² Shakespeare, William. *King Richard II*, ed. P. Ure. (Arden Edition, 1985).

²³ Hadfield, A. *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*. (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2004): 42.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

deposition scene, where Richard hands over his crown to Bolingbroke was key to Shakespeare eluding punishment by Elizabeth. Janet Clare further notes: 'When printed in the quarto of 1597, the play was carefully edited and the deposition scene cut (4.1.50–320), either at the insistence of the censors under John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury, or by the publisher and/ or author.'²⁵ CA Greer felt 'that a deposition which could not be printed in 1595 certainly could not be performed at the Globe in 1601, and therefore a different play must have been performed to suit the ends of the conspirators.'²⁶

Another explanation of Shakespeare's avoidance of arrest could be his examination of Richard's psychological turmoil and tragedy, rather than just the political aspects of Richard's rule:

It would seem that Shakespeare's play contains a far more balanced presentation of the tragic and political elements of Richard's story. And it is because this balance is so carefully achieved that the poet was able to comment on current politics, was able to have his play printed (albeit without the deposition scene) and performed (perhaps with the deposition scene) from 1595 to 1601.²⁷

Aside from using tragedy to deflect attention from political issues, Shakespeare is critical of the aristocracy and the 'commons' alike. Victor Kiernan concurs by saying:

We see great men brawling, plotting mischief, hurling abuse at one another, hiring assassins. Most of them come to a deservedly bad end. It needs no great stretch of fancy to imagine a good part of the audience rejoicing at the spectacle of a ruling class tearing itself to pieces, its ringleaders falling in battle or being marched off to the block ... Whatever Shakespeare may have thought about the 'mob', it can be said for him that he was giving commoners a liberal education with his unsparing criticism of both high and low; above all, by letting Demos hear what his masters really thought about him.²⁸

Shakespeare makes it very clear that a leader should have the support of his/her people and should rule with the interests of those same people at heart. Richard's profligacy, his

²⁵ Clare, J. 'Art made tongue-tied by authority. Elizabethan and Jacobean Censorship'. (Manchester, 1999). 68 – 72 in Hadfield, A. (2004): 15.

²⁶ Greer, CA. *The Play Performed at the Globe on 7 February, 1601, 1952* in Scott Fraser, R. *The Importance of the Political Element in Shakespeare's Richard II*. (Memorial University of Newfoundland, July 1985): 92.

²⁷ Scott-Fraser R. (1985): 103.

²⁸ Kiernan, Victor. *Shakespeare: Poet and Citizen*. (London; New York: Verso, 1993): 124.

sinister involvement in the death of the Duke of Gloucester and his unfair treatment of his subjects are all central to Richard's fall from grace.

In his play, Shakespeare does not shy away from Richard's faults. There are many characters who criticise Richard's behaviour but there are only occasional references to Richard's role in the death of the Duke of Gloucester. Richard never admits his involvement in the murder, but it is pointed out by John of Gaunt, who Shakespeare depicts as a man of honesty and authenticity. Shakespeare's downplaying of this murder could possibly have been for dramatic purposes, to create a feeling of suspense and mystery from the outset of the play. In addition, the play is a tragedy and Shakespeare places the focus on Richard's downfall, emphasising the psychology of the loss of Richard's kingship.

Shakespeare's *Richard II* is an examination of failed leadership, highlighting the dangers of the 'anointed' monarch who becomes complacent and abuses his power, relying on the idea of absolutism to absolve him of wrongdoing.

Paul Cantor emphasises Shakespeare's critique of hereditary monarchy, inferring that a monarch would need some Machiavellian qualities, or face his downfall:

For Shakespeare, the contrast between the hereditary and the new prince points to an underlying problem in political life that makes it tragic. The man who inherits his position tends – by that very fact – to become unfit for rule, because he is tempted to go soft – he never has to struggle for power and thus learn to sharpen his wits and political skills.²⁹

Throughout the play, in his depiction of Richard, Shakespeare emphasises the monarch's single-minded belief in his God-given powers. In Act I. Scene i, in his arbitration of the quarrel between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, he already reminds the two feuding Dukes (and the audience) of his elevated status, when he refers to his 'sceptre's awe' and 'our sacred blood'. Less powerful people (even aristocrats) have no recourse to justice because of this absolutism. In his conversation with the Duchess of Gloucester in Act I. Scene ii, Gaunt explains his powerlessness to act against the king for his role in Gloucester's murder:

²⁹ Cantor, Paul A. 'Shakespeare's Henry V: From the Medieval to the Modern World', in *Perspectives on Politics in Shakespeare*, eds John A. Murley and Sean D. Sutton. (Lanham: Lexington, 2006): 13. All subsequent citations come from this edition.

Gaunt: God is the quarrel – for God’s substitute,
His deputy anointed in His sight,
Hath caus’d his death; the which if wrongfully,
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry arm against His minister. (I. ii. 37 – 41)

In Act II, at the commencement of his loss of power, Richard falls back on the infallibility of a divinely chosen king:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of wordly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord;
For every man that Bolingbroke hath press’d
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel: then, if angels fight,
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right. (III. ii. 54 – 63)

His constant reference to himself shows a self-absorption that Shakespeare points out throughout the play. It is this same self-centredness and inability to examine his faults that cause his tragic downfall. The ‘balm’ that he speaks of acts as a shield of immunity and as such, he is not accountable for any of his actions. The words ‘grief’ and ‘tears’ are repeated constantly by Richard as he laments his untenable position and he is unrepentant to the last.

Through the advice of Richard’s uncle, York, and the commentary of the gardener in the garden scene, Shakespeare further emphasises the idea that it is insufficient to be a legitimate king, but that a monarch, more importantly, needs to be a just and competent ruler. In Act II, scene i, York reminds Richard of his inherited position, subtly hinting that it is undeserved (‘For how art thou a king, but by fair sequence and succession’) in his warning to Richard that he confiscates Gaunt’s wealth and property at his peril. York’s use of the word ‘wrongfully’ reminds Richard that even he should not be above the law. He also uses the word ‘rights’ three times, again referring to the rule of law, protecting the rights of subjects, that the king should regard as sacrosanct. York’s further mention of the loss of ‘a

thousand well-disposed thoughts' entrenches Shakespeare's view of the necessity of the support of his subjects:

Take Herford's rights away, and take from time 195
His charters, and his customary rights;
Let not to-morrow then ensue to-day:
Be not thyself. For how art though a king
But by fair sequence and succession?
Now afore God- God forbid I say true!- 200
If you do wrongfully seize Herford's rights,
Call in the letters patent that he hath
By his attorneys-general to sue
His livery, and deny his off'red homage,
You pluck a thousand dangers on your head,
You lose a thousand well-disposed thoughts
Which honour and allegiance cannot think. (II. i. 195 – 208)

Further on in this same scene, Northumberland speaks of England as a ‘declining land’ under the leadership of Richard – that his gullibility has meant that he is ‘basely led by flatterers’. (Act II, scene i, line 241-242). Ross adds to this indictment by mentioning Richard’s resulting lack of support amongst the nobles and the commoners alike:

Ross. The commons hath he pill'd with grievous taxes,
And quite lost their hearts. The nobles hath he fin'd
For ancient quarrels and quite lost their hearts. (II. i. 246 – 248)

The garden scene is an allegory for the nobles of England. The kingdom is compared to a garden that needs to be tended. Ambitious nobles are compared with flowers that grow too tall and 'need' to be cut down to size, matching the other plants:

Gardener: Go thou, and like an executioner
Cut off the head of too fast growing sprays,
That look too lofty in our commonwealth: (III. iv. 33 – 35)

This is a reference to Bolingbroke and Mowbray. Their sudden banishment, after the abandonment of their duel at the behest of the king, is ordered by Richard as they have

become a threat to him. Bolingbroke has widespread support (especially among the commons) and Mowbray's involvement in the Duke of Gloucester's death has become a liability to Richard. The gardener reinforces the views of York and Northumberland on Richard's conduct: 'and Bolingbroke hath seiz'd the wasteful king. O, what pity is it that he had not so trimm'd and dress'd his land'. Act III.Scene iv (54 -56). It is telling to note that Richard's failure as a king is noted by commoners (such as the gardener) and nobles alike.

The contrast in support for Bolingbroke and disapproval of Richard by the commons is clearly illustrated in Act V. Scene ii:

York: With painted imagery had said at once
 'Jesu preserve thee! Welcome, Bolingbroke!'
Whilst he, from one side to the other turning,
 Bare-heade, lower than his proud steed's neck,
 Bespake them thus, 'I thank you, countrymen'.
And thus still doing, thus he pass'd along. (V. ii. 16 – 21)

York continues by indicating the stark difference in their treatment of Richard:

York: Even so, or with much more contempt, men's eyes
 Did scowl on Richard. No man cried 'God save him!'
 No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home (V. ii 27 – 29).

Bolingbroke's reaction to Aumerle's treason is used by Shakespeare to further highlight the differences between the Duke of Herford and Richard. Bolingbroke's forgiveness of Aumerle, for his father's sake, is in stark contrast with Richard's banishment of Bolingbroke, despite his ageing father's pleas for mercy. We see a strong disapproval of injustice – in its stead, an affirmation of justice with mercy.

At the end of the play, after Richard's murder, Bolingbroke is no better than he. Usurper and rightful king end on an even footing – equally guilty of murder, with King Henry IV being the first of a line of usurpers.

The main concerns of *Henry VI Part 2* are political intrigue (mostly driven by various nobles jockeying for positions of power, but affecting the populace at large), an interrogation of the class structures of England and an examination of the role of the monarch. Like Richard II, Henry VI is a weak and ineffectual monarch. In *Henry VI Part 2*, Shakespeare, as in *Richard II*, emphasises the importance of a strong monarch with solid, centralised power, as a way of stabilising the country. This is also one of Shakespeare's only plays where the action encompasses an attempt at revolution, initiated by the common people, in the form of the Jack Cade rebellion. Shakespeare in *Henry VI Part 2* paints his antagonists from all classes as equally dastardly or disreputable.

The play is more plot-driven than *Richard II* (the plot being very episodic in nature) and lacks the psychological analysis of the king's character, but focuses more on events. However, these events are very much intertwined with development of character, as individual personalities drive the plot. As Parvini argues: 'Political decisions and actions are tightly bound up with the personalities of individual characters.'³¹

Although Shakespeare places little emphasis on Henry's interior, psychological life, the playwright uses Henry as a way of examining the concept of monarchy and its inherent problems. One of these issues is the idea of primogeniture. Shakespeare seems to be making the point that the legitimacy of the king makes very little difference to the quality of the country's governance. The last truly legitimate king was Richard II and his rule was disastrous. Henry's claim to the throne is tenuous as his grandfather, Henry IV, who usurped his position from Richard II, made it so.

In Henry's speech in the opening of Act IV, scene ix, Shakespeare gives us insight into some of the problems inherent in the monarchy. Henry has been king since he was a child, so he knows nothing else - and this may have contributed to his being out of touch with the commons. He is also not king by choice and may not necessarily have the requisite qualities necessary to the kingship:

³⁰ Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI, Parts 1, 2 and 3*, ed. D. Bavington. (New York: Bantam, 1988). All subsequent citations come from this edition.

³¹ Parvini, Neema. *Shakespeare's History Plays: re-thinking Historicism*. (Edinburgh University Press, 1972): 128.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1wf4c98.10>.

King: Was ever king that joyed an earthly throne
And could command no more content than I?
No sooner was I crept out of my cradle
But I was made a king at nine months old.
Was never subject longed to be a king
As do I long and wish to be a subject. (IV. ix. 1-6)

Henry even admits to York that his claim is weak and he does not defend his kingship against the onslaught of York. We also see occasional flashes of insight, when Henry realises that he and Gloucester are powerless against 'mighty enemies' and he also says to Margaret (in his realisation that he has been an ineffective king) that he would 'govern better'. (Act IV, Scene ix. 49). Yet his perspicacity does not translate to action; he prefers to rely on others to make decisions.

Shakespeare further shows the audience that York possesses a shrewdness that Henry lacks - and he probably would have made a good king if he had ruled. His promise to regain the lost French lands would most likely have been brought to fruition. However, his downfall is that he is too full of personal ambition. This is evident in his single-minded determination to overthrow Henry to 'rightfully' return the crown to the house of York. This characteristic becomes the downfall of his two sons who do ascend the throne. In this way, Shakespeare seems to promote three qualities as being requisite for successful political leadership: strength and resolution, political shrewdness (ie. adherence to 'realpolitik') and prioritising the needs of the general populace (nobles and commons). He also makes the point that a virtuous king is not necessarily more successful than a 'bad' king.

Henry VI Part 2 begins with Gloucester's lamenting of the loss of lands in France resulting from Henry's dowry-free, politically disadvantageous marriage to Margaret of Anjou. Henry's fecklessness is made known to the audience from the start and becomes a catalyst for a labyrinth of intrigues that the power vacuum sets in motion. The criticism of the king is inferred in Gloucester's impassioned speech to his fellow nobles.

Gloucester: O peers of England, shameful is this league!
Fatal this marriage, cancelling your fame,
Blotting your names from books of memory,
Rasing the characters of your renown,

Defacing monuments of conquered France,
Undoing all, as all had never been! (I. i. 97– 102)

Gloucester is distressed that all of Henry V's efforts and those of subsequent nobles, such as the war-hero, Talbot, have been nullified, with the returning of some French lands (Anjou and Maine) as part of the marriage negotiations. Shakespeare has already entrenched the importance of the strength of the monarch by illustrating from the start the divisive effects of Henry's poor choices. Through his speech, Gloucester tries to unite the nobles he is addressing in their common cause: the loss of key lands in France. However, this is a futile attempt, as each of the nobles has their own individual ambition and all of their desires for power bring them into conflict with each other and especially with Gloucester. Ousting him from power would be the only thing that could unite them. He forms a bulwark of integrity between their grasping for power and a weak king.

E.M.W. Tillyard believes that England would have been saved if the nobles had united and stood behind Gloucester. But Shakespeare clearly shows that lust for power and personal ambition overrode the desire for the common good:

We see that if Salisbury with his disinterestedness, Warwick with his liberal living that had endeared him to the people and York with his political authority back Humphrey up, the state may be saved.³²

By 'saved', Tillyard means prevention of future civil wars. The nobles' lack of support for Gloucester and the fulfilment of their own personal ambitions led to factional in-fighting and later on all-out civil war, in the Yorks' overthrow of Henry VI, eventually resulting in Richard III's rise to power and consequently, his overthrow by the Earl of Richmond, later to become Henry VII.

Gloucester is depicted by Shakespeare as a man of integrity and decency. This view is supported by many of the characters. Salisbury refers to Gloucester as being 'like a noble gentleman' and 'good Duke Humphrey' (I.i.182-191) as well as his mention of Gloucester's prioritising the common good rather than his own personal ambition: '... we may cherish Duke Humphrey's deeds, while they do tend the profit of the land.' (I.i.182,191 and 202). These statements follow the first line of the same speech wherein he (Salisbury) criticises

³² Tillyard, EMW. *Shakespeare's History Plays*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944): 178.

the pride and ambition of Beaufort, Buckingham and Somerset: 'Pride went before, Ambition follows him'. In this manner, Shakespeare emphasises the political dangers of individual pride and ambition. They are almost personified and lay the scene for the political wrangling to come.

Gloucester is highly thought of by the common people too. Shakespeare underlines their regard with the scene of the petitioners appealing to Gloucester for his intervention in their conflict with Suffolk. Unfortunately, they mistake Suffolk for Gloucester and their petition comes to naught. However, this scene highlights the contrast between the two men. Suffolk is seen as treacherous by the commons, which is further borne out by the Captain's listing of Suffolk's wrongdoing when he is captured en route to France in Act 4. In this scene and others, Shakespeare shows the common people as being astute judges of character. The Captain has a clear understanding of the machinations of the nobles, more so than even the royal court. The commons' regard for Gloucester is also shown in their outraged protests at Gloucester's murder. The fact that Gloucester has always been held in high regard by the commons, reflects well on them – they recognise Gloucester's honourable nature and that he rules (albeit by proxy) with the common good uppermost in his mind.

Cohen argues that Shakespeare is disparaging in his depiction of the poor, who are, in his opinion, 'seen as so many fools and dolts, easily misled by a villain who promises them anarchy, wealth, and revenge against their enemies the rich.'³³ While this statement is true when applied to characters such as Simpcox and Cade, it most certainly isn't with regard to Gloucester's supporters: the Captain, with his thorough understanding of Suffolk's crimes, and the Butcher, who sees through all of Cade's pretences. The characters Bevis and Holland also give telling indications of the inequality of English society in their conversation in Act IV, scene ii:

Holland: Well I say it was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up.

Bevis: O' miserable age! Virtue is not regarded in handicraftsmen.

Holland: The nobility think scorn to go in leather aprons.

Bevis: Nay, more, the King's council are no good workmen. (IV. ii. 10 – 14)

³³ Cohen, Derek. *The Politics of Shakespeare*. (New York: St Martin's Press. 1993): 60.

The two make very sharp observations about the corruption of the landed classes – of which they are victims. They also comment on the scorn of the upper classes for the poor. In this exchange, they hardly qualify as ‘fools or dolts.’

These characters rise above the nobles (with the exception of Gloucester). Shakespeare portrays the full extent of the nobles’ villainy and they emerge from the play as far inferior in honour and integrity to the less well-born – Cade being the exception.

Gloucester is a foil for Henry VI as well as Suffolk. His exposure of Simpcox as a fraud in the ‘miracle’ scene of Act II shows his astuteness and his meting out of appropriate justice. Henry’s lack of judiciousness is foregrounded in the Peter versus Horner scene. Henry, instead of spending time and effort on a proper trial, makes them sort out their differences through physical combat. Even though this was at Gloucester’s instigation, Henry should have insisted on a proper trial. In this scene, it is clear that Henry is unable to make a distinction between a criminal and an innocent man. (Horner was unfairly targeted by his employee, Peter, who simply had a grudge against him. Horner is then made drunk by some of the nobles, causing him to lose the fight.) Here, Shakespeare is pointing out the importance of a just ruler, whose decisions affect all sectors of society.

Through Gloucester, Shakespeare further illustrates the importance of Machiavellian political astuteness: ‘The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily come to grief among so many who are not virtuous.’³⁴ Kiernan argues that ‘Shakespeare is very unlikely to have known Machiavelli’s *Discourses* at first hand, but there is plentiful evidence of his familiarity with their doctrines’.³⁵ In Shakespeare’s eyes, Gloucester would not be a successful king as he lacks the political shrewdness to outmanoeuvre his enemies. He does not listen to his wife, Eleanor, who warns him against Suffolk, York and Beaufort. Instead, he believes that his integrity will protect him:

Gloucester: I must offend before I be attainted;
 And had I twenty times so many foes,
 And each of them had twenty times their power,
 All these could not procure me any scathe,
 So long as I am loyal, true and crimeless. (II. iv. 64)

³⁴ Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*, Ch. XV, 50, 4th edition, trans. Geoffrey Bull. (New York; London: Penguin, 2003.)

³⁵ Melchiori, George. *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Meditations: an Experiment in Criticism*. (Oxford 1976) in Kiernan, Victor. *Shakespeare: Poet and Citizen*. (London; New York: Verso. 1993): 85.

His political naivete (with his concomitant belief in protection provided by his honour and blamelessness) is quite remarkable and is the cause of his downfall. To be fair to Gloucester, it is important to note that he was thoroughly outnumbered. All of the nobles opposed him as he stood between them and unbridled power. As Henry was a weak king, he could easily be manipulated without the protection of Gloucester. The Protector's innocence and goodness is quite irrelevant to their greedy cause. However, had Henry been of stronger character, the nobles would not have tried to manipulate him and Gloucester would have had some protection in turn against their machinations. Henry is a very poor judge of character and extremely out of touch with his citizens. He is aware of his wife's affair with Suffolk, yet does not act on it, until by default, where he is pressured by the commons to banish Suffolk. For once he actually listens to his citizens. From the beginning, they have seen and been on the receiving end of Suffolk's wrongdoing – from his enclosures of common lands to the cold-blooded murder of a good man. If Henry had not been so self-absorbed, he would also have been more aware of the danger of Suffolk (and by association, Margaret).

With Henry IV's usurpation, some decades earlier, a strong, clear lineage of kings no longer existed. A precedent had been set with the deposing of a rightful king (Richard II) and this now paved the way for the power struggles to come.

York bases his claim to the throne on his descentance from Richard II. He becomes the emergent figure in *Henry VI Part 2*. As in *Richard II*, this play deals with the rise of one man and the fall of another, as underlined by Tillyard:

In contrast to the first part, where the main theme was the fate of a single man, we have here simultaneously the fall of one man and the rise of another, the pattern of the two buckets on one chain, repeated in *Richard II*.³⁶

York very cleverly gauges the reactions of the commons to his potential overthrow of the king, by using Jack Cade to stage a rebellion while he is on a military excursion in Ireland (another poor decision by Henry – putting a powerful army in the hands of a potential enemy). York's motivation to use Cade's rebellion as a litmus test for the feeling of the general populace is a skilful political move. Through this, Shakespeare illustrates the

³⁶ Tillyard, EMW. (1944): 175.

importance of the monarch (or would-be monarch in this case) to have the support of the general public. York is well aware of the need for public support, yet Henry is not.

Shakespeare hides a penetrating study of contemporary social ills behind the carnival-like, comedic Jack Cade scenes in Act IV. His darkly comic depiction of Cade is intended to create a smoke screen for the commentary on both literacy and the glaring inequality of English society. As Shakespeare's audiences were from all sectors of society, he needed to cater for all tastes. The almost stylised violence and crude comedy would appeal to the commons, yet his social criticism would almost certainly be aimed at the ruling classes. Shakespeare also needed to dodge the ever-present censor. He hides the condonation of rebellion behind comedy.

Jack Cade becomes a caricature of the nobles he aspires both to replicate and to overthrow, in the indiscriminate and violent 'justice' that he metes out to Lord Saye and the Clerk of Chartham. His complaint is just; Elizabethans who broke the law were more likely to be hanged if they could not read or write, a practice that Craig Bernthal discusses:

The rebels' anger at benefit of clergy is well founded. The practice allowed guilty first offenders to escape, while putting the innocent illiterate to execution. It was invoked with a regularity that continually displayed the system's unfairness.³⁷

Parvini adds to this viewpoint:

Shakespeare explicitly associates writing with education. The clerk is privy to knowledge and skills to which the rebels have no access; Dick points out that the clerk can 'write court-hand' (4.2.77). Evidently, the rebels are resentful of the fact that the written word is used to administer their lives, when they do not and cannot have the means to read and write themselves.³⁸

Shakespeare emphasises this inequality in the conversation between Cade and Lord Saye:

³⁷ Bernthal, Craig. 'Jack Cade's Legal Carnival.' *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, JSTOR, Volume. 42, no. 2 (2002): 265. www.jstor.org/stable/1556114.

³⁸ Parvini, N. (1972): 150.

Saye: Justice with favour have I always done;
Prayers and tears have moved me, gifts could never.
When have I aught exacted at your hands
But to maintain the Kind, the realm and you?
Large gifts have I bestowed on learned clerks,
Because my book preferred me to the King;
And seeing ignorance is the curse of God,
Knowledge the wing wherewith we fly to heaven ... (IV. vii 64 - 71)

Lord Saye (like Gloucester) is one of the few nobles of integrity – in the first few lines of this speech, we see his loyalty to the country at large. However, the last two lines indicate a deep lack of understanding or acceptance of the inequality that he presides over. The poor did not have access to learning and the implication here is that they are therefore shut out of heaven and are out of favour with God. Saye seems quite oblivious to this despite his goodness. Shakespeare is making the point that no matter how honourable they may be, the aristocracy do not question the status quo, which is immeasurably unjust to the poor of English society.

Despite being moved by Lord Saye's pleas, Cade does not relent. The violence that he commits in response to the legitimate grievances of the commons is brutal and off-putting to the audience. By reminding audiences of Cade's execution at the hands of Alexander Iden, Shakespeare ensures that he is not seen to be condoning rebellion.

Through his depiction of Cade as a brutal buffoon, Shakespeare has been accused by many scholars of merely espousing Tudor propaganda. Greenblatt, Cohen and Richard Wilson all subscribe to this view. Parvini emphasises this general opinion by stating: 'Few critics have challenged the orthodox reading of Cade's rebellion as a conservative Tudor warning against the dangers of popular protest.' However, Parvini makes the argument – with which I concur – that there is much progressive political commentary in *Henry VI Part 2* and subscribes to the view espoused by Howard: 'Cade ... offers the most radical critique of social inequality [in *2 Henry VI*], [but] is personally vilified and discredited within the play

[because] he probably had to be for the drama to be [passed by the censors] and staged'.³⁹ Chris Fitter, who posits that 'Shakespeare seeks to destabilise establishment ideology'⁴⁰ also agrees with this point of view.

Shakespeare draws some parallels between the protests in the play and various rebellions that had taken place in Elizabethan England. Fitter further asserts: 'That Shakespeare's primary concern was political engagement of his contemporary moment, rather than reconstruction of the mid-fifteenth century, is clear in his recurrent departures from the Chronicles'.⁴¹ Shakespeare's drawing on contemporary events is also evident in the playwright's portrayal of Cade as a clothier, reflecting the Midsummer Riots of 1592, where apprentices protested against high food prices, the greed of the wealthy and the treatment of previous protesters. Cade was also modelled on 'Puritan fanatic, William Hacket, who led a farcical rising in July 1591'.⁴²

In addition to making his audiences aware of the inequalities in their society, Shakespeare provides a commentary on monarchy and its inherent problems. While he does not openly advocate for the abolition of monarchy, he does present an in-depth examination of what makes a successful (or in the case of Henry VI – unsuccessful) monarch.

Richard III ⁴³

Although *Richard III* is generally seen as a study in the psychology and motivation behind amoral political ambition, Shakespeare deals with a number of political concerns, such as the qualities necessary for successful leadership, the power of oratorical skills in political manipulation as well as the connections between the ruler and the state (or society at large). However, Shakespeare still manages to create some audience sympathy for Richard. His disabilities and resultant rejection by his mother sway us somewhat, as does his sheer nerve in the wooing of Anne. Shakespeare's wicked Richard has become embedded in the public imagination far more so than the considerably less evil, historical Richard.

³⁹ Parvini, N. (1972): 145.

⁴⁰ Fitter, Chris. 'Emergent Shakespeare and the Politics of Protest: 2 *Henry VI* in Historical Contexts.' *ELH*, Volume 72, no. 1 (2005): 129. www.jstor.org/stable/30029965 .

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Wilson, Robert. *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority*. (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1993): 23-44.

⁴³ Shakespeare, William. *King Richard III*, ed. A. Hammond. (London: Arden Edition, 1981). All subsequent citations come from this edition.

The play opens with Richard's famous soliloquy: Shakespeare, unusually, introduces *Richard III* and the eponymously named protagonist with a soliloquy. Richard is immediately connected with the audience and forms a kind of choric presence. Alexander Leggatt concurs by stating:

Richard III is the only play of Shakespeare's to begin with a soliloquy by one of its characters. We may think at first that the effect can be paralleled in Marlowe. But neither Faustus nor Barabas actually begins his play; each is introduced by a chorus, establishing a certain critical distance. Richard is not just hero but chorus and presenter as well.⁴⁴

Shakespeare is emphasising Richard's aloneness – the factor of his solitude contributes to his later failure as a monarch, as he is unable to work successfully with others – despite his charisma, he can only inspire fear. According to Nick Meyers, 'in his essential solitude, therefore, Richard is perhaps the most tyrannical of all Shakespeare's tyrants.'⁴⁵ A leader needs to establish a network of positive relationships with those surrounding them and it is important to note that Richard lacks these relationships. He only has henchmen, such as Catesby, Ratcliffe and Buckingham, who act only in fear or for personal gain. Richard forms a notable contrast to his brother, Edward IV, whose successful relationships with advisers and others enabled him to rule over a peaceful, unified England, an England spared for 22 years of tyranny and fear. However, for dramatic purposes, Shakespeare condenses these 22 years into a very short time period, to enable a smooth continuation from the end of *Henry VI Part 3* to the beginning of *Richard III*, where the focus is on Richard himself.

Through this soliloquy, Shakespeare shows that it is only the audience who is privy to Richard's most private thoughts. This lack of transparency in a leader is emphasised from the outset. Richard delivers the last soliloquy in *Henry VI* and the first one in *Richard III*. In both of these speeches, he shares with us his deepest secrets and ambitions. In Act V, scene iii, of *Henry VI, Part 3*, we become aware of the extent to which his physical deformities shape his thinking and his ambitions. His physical imperfections have set him

⁴⁴ Leggatt, Alexander. *Shakespeare's Political Drama*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1988): 32-33.

⁴⁵ Myers Nick. 'Figures of the Tyrant: The Context to Shakespeare's Richard III'. XVII-XVIII. *Bulletin de la société d'études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*. No. 49, (1999): 39. https://www.persee.fr/doc/xvii_0291-3798_1999_num_49_1_2094.

apart from others – even his own mother has rejected him. Consequently, he makes a decision to become a villain since he is physically unable to be a lover:

Richard: And so I was, which plainly signified
That I should snarl and bite and play the dog.
Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,
Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it.
I have no brother, I am like no brother;
And this word 'love', which greybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another
And not in me. I am myself alone. (Henry VI, Part 3. V. vi. 76-79)⁴⁶

He continues outlining his plans of eliminating Clarence in the next few lines. His ambitions for the kingship are further illuminated in the opening soliloquy of *Richard III*.

Shakespeare also draws attention to Richard's superb oratory skills from the outset. This is especially evident in the clever pun on the word, 'sun' in the first soliloquy, making reference to the Yorkist symbol and the concept of 'sons' (I.i.1-4) – this will form an important aspect of the play as well as the universal symbolism of the sun, relating to power and strength. In his emphasis on Richard's oratory skills, Shakespeare illustrates the importance of language and rhetoric in political life, which Richard will use as a means to amass more power, in his manipulation of those he needs to bend to his will. He uses a combination of brute force as well as persuasion through language, a necessity for a populist and/or authoritarian leader.

Richard is witty and engaging – consequently, the audience almost forgives his abject cruelty and brutality. His gift for language enables him to manipulate those around him – his seduction of Anne, literally over the dead body of her late husband, is a notable example. Despite his physical shortcomings, his charisma, drawn largely from his linguistic gifts, attracts people like Anne to him. Shakespeare seems to make the point that a powerful and effective leader must be charismatic and much of this charisma manifests in an ability to persuade people to their way of thinking. This is especially evident in *Richard III*. Richard's

⁴⁶ Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI, Parts 1, 2 and 3*, ed. D. Bavington. (New York: Bantam, 1988).

magnetism forms a striking contrast with the hapless Richard II and Henry VI. Yet all three cannot be defined as effective leaders – the latter two kings are weak and ineffectual, while Richard III is a tyrant. Charisma is therefore not the only requisite for successful leadership.

In Richard III's case, his eloquent speeches enable him to manipulate those around him, so that he is able to entrench his power. Shakespeare contrasts this misuse of a linguistic gift with that of little Prince Edward. The child's comments on the power of orally recorded history and his disbelieving dismissal of Richard's disparaging comments about his uncles show a potentially great leader in waiting. Shakespeare, in this way, highlights the tragedy of a life cut short. The Prince's innocence brings Richard's heinous crime of child-murder into sharp relief.

Shakespeare illustrates how Richard tries to legitimise his power grab by appealing to the citizens. The word 'citizens' appears nearly twice as often in *Richard III* as in *Coriolanus* and five times more than *Julius Caesar*. Ann Kaegi elaborates:

A survey of criticism would suggest that the lexical prevalence of citizens in *Richard III* is a statistical aberration, for while commentary on the citizens in the two Roman plays is commonplace those in *Richard III* typically receive only glancing attention despite the fact that key members of the ruling elite make a determined effort to sway the political sympathies of citizens at a crucial moment in *Richard III* as they do in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, and like their counterparts in *Coriolanus* the citizens in *Richard III* participate in a process of popular election. However, the outcome of popular political participation in *Richard III* appears, at first glance, to be the inverse of that in *Coriolanus*.⁴⁷

The frequent appearance of the citizens and Richard asking for their support seems oddly out of place in a play which examines the psychology of tyranny, however, there is a solid reason for Richard appealing for their endorsement. According to Ann Kaegi, the City of London supplied soldiers and funding to the sovereign:

⁴⁷Kaegi, Ann. 'What say the citizens' in Shakespeare's *Richard III*?' *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, Volume 2 (2013): 93. <https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-jems/article/view/6999>.

Ever since the Great Rising of 1381 during the reign of Richard II, England's sovereigns had been periodically reminded of the need to win and maintain the loyalty of Londoners to secure their hold on the throne. Long reliant on the municipal government's capacity to muster trained bands of militia to defend the capital and prosecute their wars, by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries successive Tudor and Stuart monarchs were also critically dependent on loans from the City to fund their reign.⁴⁸

Although Kaegi is referring to the historical Richard, Shakespeare's Richard realises that he would need the favourable opinion of his citizens or subjects. Shakespeare does not allude to his reason for doing so – perhaps their support in wars was an obvious fact for the Jacobean. Whatever Richard's reasons, he sends Buckingham on a fact-finding mission to gauge the opinions of the commons. He finds his first obstacle in their silent refusal to endorse him. Shakespeare does not elaborate as to why the citizens oppose him so strongly, but if, as in *Henry VI*, the citizens are very well informed as to the conduct of their leaders, they have prior knowledge of Richard's nature.

The first appearance of the citizens occurs in Act II, Scene iii. Here the three citizens discuss the death of King Edward IV. They fear the uncertainty that lies ahead, and in this exchange, Shakespeare shows us a different viewpoint – that of the commons. Their discussion is rational and intelligent. The first citizen is afraid of the chaos that might ensue with a child-ruler, but the third citizen tries to allay his fears by reminding him of the 'politic grave counsel' (II.iii.20) of King Henry VI's 'virtuous uncles' (II.iii.21). The third citizen undercuts this, however, when he talks of all of the political intrigues of the court. He singles Richard out in particular with his warning that 'O full of danger is the Duke of Gloucester' (II.iii.27). Like their counterpart, the Captain in *Henry VI*, they seem to have considerable insight into the machinations of the court. Richard's elaborate ruses to hide his villainy do not fool them and they see him as he really is. They are certainly not 'fools and dolts.'⁴⁹

In Act III, Scene vii, the fact that Richard also sends an underling (Buckingham) to ascertain the citizens' opinions may have hardened their feelings towards the aspiring monarch. His entire appeal may have come across as insincere and grasping. Buckingham reports back to him on the citizens' dissent:

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 94.

⁴⁹ Cohen, D. *The Politics of Shakespeare*. (New York: St Martin's Press. 1993): 60.

Buckingham: No, so God help me: they spake not a word,
But like dumb statues or breathing stones
Star'd each on other, and look'd deadly pale.
Which when I saw, I reprehended them,
And ask'd the Mayor what meant this wilful silence. (III.vii.24-28)

The citizens mentioned in Buckingham's speech echo the third citizen's awareness of Richard's true nature, once again implying a perceptiveness lacking in many members of the court who are deceived by Richard. His own brother, Clarence, did not believe in his villainy until the very point of death. Shakespeare is also emphasising once more the citizens' fear of the effects of King Edward's death, their lack of control over their own lives. Their fear of Richard also seems to eclipse that of the fear of uncertainty.

The scrivener's scene in Act III, Scene vi also emphasises the insights that the commons had into Richard's true nature. The scrivener obviously does not believe the trumped-up charges against Hastings:

Scrivener: Here's a good world the while! Who is so gross
That cannot see this palpable device?
Yet who's so bold but says he sees it not? (III.vii.10-11)

In these lines, the scrivener acknowledges that the charges against Hastings are false. He also gives us insight into the fear that Richard inspires, with the line 'Yet who's so bold but says he sees it not?' The scene closes with the scrivener's deep misgivings about a world in which there can be no transparency or freedom of speech:

Scrivener: Bad is the world, and all will come to naught
When such ill-dealing must be seen in thought. (III. vii .13-14)

As Gloucester of *Henry VI* is deeply respected by the commons, so is Lord Hastings of Richard III. This is evident from the scrivener's speech. Shakespeare also makes a point about political leadership through the scenario of Lord Hastings' death. He does not listen to Stanley's warning and, like Gloucester, believes that his innocence will save him. His

over-confidence and lack of caution or scepticism cause his downfall, as he becomes victim to Richard's brutal ruthlessness.

As mentioned previously, Richard's naked ambition and cruel elimination of any opposition prevent him from forming any positive relationships – he alienates the nobles around him – and they eventually turn to Richmond, who arrives as their saviour at the end of the play. Shakespeare shows us, as he did with Macbeth, that a tyrant will inevitably meet a horrible end.

CHAPTER THREE

In this chapter, I will be examining the Roman plays in the order in which they were written, with the aim of following the development of Shakespeare's thought. Connections between contemporary events in Shakespeare's England which may have informed his writing and his plays will be integrated into the analysis. It must be borne in mind that, in terms of Roman history, placing the plays in this order does not follow a chronological trajectory. *Titus Andronicus* (1591-1592) is not as rooted in Roman history as *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-1607) and *Coriolanus* (1608); however, it can be assumed that it was set in the imperial period. *Julius Caesar* takes place just before Rome becomes an empire. At the start of the play, Rome is still a republic but with the accession to power of Antony, at the end, is moving inexorably towards empire. *Antony and Cleopatra* deals with the political in-fighting that is the inevitable result of empire. *Coriolanus* is set in the early Roman republic.

Shakespeare's Roman plays illustrate a substantive array of political ideas, particularly pertaining to the concepts of *vox populi* and republicanism. He explores these ideas with varying perspectives in *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. All four of these plays are set against the backdrop of the Roman republic or present the transition from republic to empire. Shakespeare's thinking was definitely influenced by his classical sources, as well as contemporary thinkers such as Machiavelli. As with most renaissance writers, Shakespeare was fascinated with ancient history. He was also able to escape the censors by drawing on history that was in the distant past, yet presented parallels with the politics of his time. Dominique Goy-Blanquet concurs with this view: 'The Roman world which Elizabethans felt heirs to was both close and remote enough to provide the best stage for a new sequence of plays.'⁵⁰

As mentioned previously in this thesis, Shakespeare did not openly advocate republicanism, owing to the prospect of sedition charges. However, his plays do put forward a variety of ideas on 'mixed governance'. An overarching narrative, evident in the Roman plays especially, is that there should be some sort of representation from all sectors of society.

⁵⁰ Hattaway, Michael., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*. (Cambridge University Press, 2002): 67.

Shakespeare generally followed Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* very closely. As an example of this from beyond the Roman plays, Cantor mentions Fluellen in Act IV, Scene 7 of *Henry V*, who comically compares Alexander the Great with Henry in North's Plutarch's style:

The fact that Shakespeare chose this opportunity to have a little fun at Plutarch's expense is actually evidence of his debt to the Greek author. He read the *Parallel Lives* so carefully that he could slip into the style of North's Plutarch with ease.⁵¹

As with the English history plays, the Roman plays are focused on the characters themselves and their inner psychological lives. Shakespeare's emphasis echoes Plutarch's focus on the characters rather than the political systems which inform their lives. Plutarch explained his intention:

My interest is not to write histories, but only lives. For the noblest deeds do not always show men's virtues and vices; but oftentimes a light occasion, a word, or some sport makes men's natural dispositions and manners appear more plain than the famous battles won wherein are slain ten thousand men, or the great armies or cities won by siege and assault.⁵²

However, both writers imbue their work with details of the environments from which the characters emerge.

Plutarch was a Greek living under Roman rule, but his *Lives* encompasses the time period up to the rule of Caesar. According to Cantor:

In the question of polis and empire, commentators disagree over which side Plutarch supported, and some say that he tried to mediate between the two. Whatever Plutarch's position may ultimately have been, merely by posing the question, his *Lives* provided fertile ground for Shakespeare's reading, given the interest in the contrast between republic and empire that is at the heart of his Roman plays, an interest that either drew Shakespeare to Plutarch in the first place or was sparked by his reading of the *Lives*.⁵³

⁵¹ Cantor, P. *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017): 183.

⁵² Spencer T.J.B., ed. *Shakespeare's Plutarch*. (London: Penguin, 1964): 71.

⁵³ Cantor, P. (2017): 191.

It is also important to note that Shakespeare chose lives that were very flawed. Coriolanus, Caesar and Antony all have clay feet and Shakespeare was obviously fascinated by the contradictions displayed by these men. In this way he was also able to develop both the private and the public aspects of these individuals. The public aspect led to an examination of the political environments which produced these men.

Shakespeare was also influenced by Livy, the Roman historian. Anne Barton elaborates:

As an author, Livy is likely to have impinged upon Shakespeare's consciousness at a relatively early age. Selections from his work were often read in the upper forms of Elizabethan grammar schools, ranking in popularity only behind Sallust and Caesar.⁵⁴

Barton further argues that Livy was an historian who, unlike Plutarch, recorded the history of a city and all of its people, rather than singling out individual lives. He was an ardent champion of the republic.⁵⁵

Shakespeare's Roman plays are imbued with the influence of Livy, even though he was not a main source, such as Plutarch (or as Holinshed was for the history plays). *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus* especially bear the hallmarks of Livy's philosophies. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare made use of other sources (or rather, influences), such as Ovid and Seneca. However, the latter two were used more for purposes of plot and characterisation, rather than an examination of Rome. Livy's ideas on morality and honour were especially important to Shakespeare and he examines this theme in *Coriolanus* in particular:

Livy upholds an idea of morality and honour that is distinct from other important Augustan writers. While Virgil and Horace give prominence to the virtues of peace – an understandable response to civil war – Livy depicted the highest good as pursuit of glory through military service of the state. Livy's ideals of honour were also unusual for his time, lacking a deeper influence of Greek philosophy.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Barton, A. 'Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*' in Alexander, C., ed. *Shakespeare and Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 69.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Culhane, Peter. 'Livy and *Titus Andronicus*'. *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 1 -13. Volume 55 (Spring 2006): 2. <https://academic.oup.com/english/article-abstract/55/211/1/414321?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

Although *Titus Andronicus* is based on fictional characters, there is much emphasis on republicanism and the city of Rome. Vivienne Thomas feels that ‘Shakespeare has gone to great lengths to convey a sense of primitive Rome.’⁵⁷ Yet the hallmarks of republicanism that are present in *Coriolanus* are absent from *Titus Andronicus*, for example, the tribunes (in *Titus*, they are from the patrician class rather than from the plebeian class) and the consuls. The wars with the Goths and the presence of an emperor point to an imperial Rome. However, this is not clear, as there is no mention of wars with other territories, besides that of the Goths. The Rome of *Coriolanus* fights constant wars with the Volscis, yet it is not an empire. At the opening of *Titus Andronicus*, the previous emperor has recently died, and his successor is being proposed by various factions. The fact that there is a debate as to the succession implies a form of republicanism, as his appointment does not simply rest on primogeniture.

The Discourses of Livy by Machiavelli also provided much inspiration for Shakespeare. Ringwood argues that Shakespeare would have been very familiar with the works of Machiavelli: ‘While there is no direct evidence that Shakespeare ever read Machiavelli, either in English or Italian, Shakespeare was so immersed in a culture informed by the ideas of Machiavelli that it would make little difference whether he did or not.’⁵⁸ Paul Cantor elaborates on similarities to Machiavelli in some passages of *Coriolanus* (such as the conversation between the two tribunes at the end of the first scene) and Act III of *Antony and Cleopatra* in particular:

Shakespeare shows a sound understanding of political realities in Rome, an understanding expressed with a clarity of vision that reminds one of Machiavelli. The thoughts expressed in Act III, scene I, of *Antony and Cleopatra* are in fact so remarkably similar to those expressed in *Discourses on Livy*, Book I, Chapter xxx, that after reading the two passages in succession, one finds it difficult to believe that Shakespeare was not acquainted in some form with Machiavelli’s work.⁵⁹

Machiavelli was heavily criticised by many contemporary scholars in England. Some believed that he promoted tyranny in the philosophy of *realpolitik* that is evident in *The Prince*. To illustrate this prejudice, in many of Shakespeare’s histories there are allusions

⁵⁷ Thomas, Vivienne. *Shakespeare’s Roman Worlds*. (London: Routledge, 1989): 29.

⁵⁸ Ringwood, F. ‘Shakespeare’s Mavericks and the Machiavellian Moment’. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, Volume 32 (2019): 39. <https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.4314/sisa.v32i1.5>.

⁵⁹ Cantor, P. *Shakespeare’s Rome: Republic and Empire*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1976): 41.

to the 'Machiavel', where Shakespeare draws our attention to this negative view. Here a 'Machiavel' is someone who employs ruthless methods to achieve power and dominance. Innocent Gentillet's attack on Machiavelli in 1576 was very widely read in England, with many Elizabethans basing their knowledge on his very biased work and not on the original texts.⁶⁰

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli outlines the analogies of the fox and the lion. He argues that a political leader has to 'be capable of the slyness of the fox as well as the strength of the lion'⁶¹. Shakespeare's exploration of the characters, Coriolanus, Menenius, Antony and Octavius Caesar, would be most applicable here - where he argues that a successful leader needs both strength and cunning.

Ann Forrester argues that Shakespeare's plays are almost all imbued with Machiavellian thought:

I shall therefore concentrate on three particular aspects of Machiavelli's ideas as expounded in *The Prince*: virtu, separation of politics and ethics, and the best actions to recently usurped the position of authority. These three are often mixed closely together and it is not always possible to separate them cleanly in discussion of character. Indeed, to adhere to the characteristics of virtu it is often necessary to make use of the other two precepts. Some characters show one attribute above all others; often characters may hold and then lose specific aspects of virtu, many display a cynical disregard for ethics when political matters become pressing; and often the action of the play depends on whether the character can exercise cruelty in an isolated instance without succumbing to the temptation to see it as a permanent way out of his problems.⁶²

Machiavelli's republican ideas are often manifested in his beliefs on war. He felt that 'the most actively virtuous state is constantly at war, because only then can the worthiness of the citizens be put to the test'.⁶³ Shakespeare examines this narrative in considerable depth in *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* particularly, exploring it from different perspectives, especially the role of the citizens and the concept of political leadership in

⁶⁰ Gentillet, I. 'Discours Contre Machiavel' (1576) in Ringwood, F. 'Shakespeare's Mavericks and the Machiavellian Moment'. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* Volume 32 (2019): 39. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/sisa.v32i1.5>.

⁶¹ Hadfield, A. *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* (London: The Arden Shakespeare. 2004): 70.

⁶² Forrester, Ann. 'Machiavellian Precepts in Shakespeare's Plays'. (Eric Publishers, 1995): 2. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED392047.pdf>.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 81.

times of both war and peace. Shakespeare's critique of the philosophy of 'virtus' in *Coriolanus* especially, reflects an idea that war has a detrimental effect on an individual's psyche. His penetrating study of Coriolanus would attest to this and would pit him against Machiavelli, in this sense.

Titus Andronicus⁶⁴

Titus Andronicus focuses on the different kinds of political leadership required in both war and peace time. As in *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare illustrates the shortcomings of the soldier-leader during peace time. Titus especially embodies the Roman ideal of 'virtus' which encompasses military valour, manliness, excellence, courage, character and worth, derived from the Latin *vir* ('man'). Titus's rigid adherence to Roman codes of behaviour causes his own destruction, that of his family and the destabilisation of Rome.

The extreme violence depicted in the play is largely responsible for its often being overlooked when stage productions are chosen. In terms of the English stage, after the 18th century, *Titus Andronicus* lay dormant, only to be performed again in 1923 at the Old Vic.⁶⁵ G.H. Metz explains further:

During its nearly 400-year history *The Most Lamentable Romaine Tragedie of Titus Andronicus* has almost always been among the least frequently produced Shakespearean plays. It has enjoyed four periods of some popularity, rather widely separated, but it has also experienced long periods of neglect, the longest continuing for more than a century. By comparison to the great tragedies composed later in Shakespeare's career, then, *Titus* has been infrequently presented. Setting aside the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, concerning which details of performances are scant, one finds that there have been more productions and more performances of *Titus Andronicus* since 1923 than during any comparable period in the play's earlier stage history.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*, ed. J.C Maxwell (London: Arden Edition, 1968).

⁶⁵ Stanton, K. 'Intersections of Politics, Culture, Class, and Gender in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merchant of Venice*'. *Multicultural Shakespeare*. Volume 12, no. 27 (2015): 44.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281231757_Intersections_of_Politics_Culture_Class_and_Gender_in_Shakespeare's_Titus_Andronicus_The_Taming_of_the_Shrew_and_The_Merchant_of_Venice/citations.

⁶⁶ Metz, G. Harold. 'Stage History of *Titus Andronicus*.' *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Volume 28, no. 2 (1977): 154. www.jstor.org/stable/2869397.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen an increase in productions of *Titus Andronicus*. From 1957 to 1974, for example, there were more than four hundred productions of the play world-wide.⁶⁷

Some Victorian critics rejected *Titus* over doubts as to its authorship, however, it is now believed to be a collaboration between Shakespeare and George Peele, an ardent classicist. As noted above, it is set apart from the other three Roman plays, owing to its being fictional and not based on actual historical characters. However, Shakespeare draws extensively from Livy and also the writings of the Greek historian, Herodian, notably his *History*. Herodian traces 'the advent of the Roman republic and its decline into tyranny.'⁶⁸ Herodian's *History* comprises bloody tales of tyrannical emperors, who spawn endless cycles of violence. There is also a plethora of accounts of Roman conflict with the barbarians in Britain and Germany. There are even two characters called Saturninus and Bassianus, although they are very different to those in Shakespeare's play. The fact that *Titus* is fictional may be a literary advantage, giving Shakespeare more scope in which to present his ideas – particularly political concepts or methods of governance. T.J.B. Spencer underscores this by saying, 'It is not so much that any particular set of political institutions is assumed in *Titus*, but rather that it includes *all* the political institutions that Rome ever had.'⁶⁹ Shakespeare includes anachronisms (this will be discussed more fully later) such as an emperor along with senators and tribunes even though he would have been well aware that all three never co-existed.

Shakespeare opens his play with a succession crisis, the choice of a new emperor to succeed the one who has just died. The succession crisis in Elizabethan England caused its inhabitants much anxiety. They were worried about the uncertainty surrounding the queen's lack of an heir to the throne, particularly as she was in poor health. To make matters worse, she forbade anyone to speak about the Issue. Shakespeare was obviously addressing the concerns of his audiences by drawing a parallel between the Roman succession crisis depicted in *Titus*, with that in England. Just as the Roman characters worried about ensuing civil war, so did Shakespeare and his contemporaries in England. They did not want a repeat of the Wars of the Roses. Even when King James I was named as Elizabeth's successor, the prospect of his ascension to the throne caused much anxiety.

⁶⁷Smith-Bernstein, Isabel. *EmptychairTitus*. (2011). <https://emptychairtitus.weebly.com/timeline-of-performance-history.html>.

⁶⁸ Hadfield, A. *Shakespeare and Republicanism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 155.

⁶⁹ Spencer, TJB. 'Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans.' *Shakespeare Survey*. Volume 10 (1957): 32.

Titus Andronicus begins with the conundrums of choosing a new leader, with a peaceful transition of power. In the opening scenes of Act 1, through the characters Saturninus, Bassianus and Marcus, Shakespeare presents arguments pertaining to the ascension of the new monarch and showing different forms of political rule. The concept of monarchy is never in doubt, but what kind of monarchy is the cause of the clash between Saturninus and his brother, Bassianus. The mere fact of a debate over the next emperor means that primogeniture was not automatic. Saturninus argues for primogeniture, as he believes that it is his birth right:

Saturninus: Noble patricians, patrons of my right,
 Defend the justice of my cause with arms
 And countrymen, my loving followers,
 Plead my successive title with your swords.
 I am his first-born son that was the last 5.
 That wore the imperial diadem of Rome:
 Then let my father's honours live in me,
 Nor wrong mine age with this indignity. (I.i.1-8)

It is important to note that Saturninus's only defence is his birth right. He does not mention anything else that he may offer in being a competent leader – he seems only interested in the power and the prestige that the position will bring. He also says that like-minded people must defend his cause by taking up arms and he is only appealing to the elite classes ('noble patricians'). There is an implication that violence could follow, from factions who don't agree with his ascension, which must be met with more violence. Tyranny would ensue. Shakespeare's inference is that primogeniture is not a viable option in the choice of a monarch. Through this speech, he is emphasising how important it is for a leader to have integrity as well as the support of the general populace. Otherwise, civil war or unrest follows. He underlines this view in Bassianus's speech which follows shortly after:

Bassianus: Romans, friends, followers, favourers of my right,
 If ever Bassianus, Caesar's son, 10
 Were gracious in the eyes of royal Rome,
 Keep then this passage to the Capitol,
 And suffer not dishonour to approach
 The imperial seat, to virtue consecrate,
 To justice, continence and nobility; 15

But let desert in pure election shine,
And, Romans, fight for freedom in your choice. (I.i.9-17)

Bassianus's speech contains diametrically opposed political ideas to that of Saturninus. Here he appeals to all Romans, not just the elites. His address of them as 'friends' implies that he sees them as his equal. According to Hadfield:

His vocabulary signals his political position as he uses a series of key words to establish his principles: 'virtue', 'justice', 'continence', 'nobility', 'desert', 'election' and 'choice', terms that mark him out as a candidate steeped in republicanism.⁷⁰

Bassianus promises that he will be informed by integrity and fairness. The words 'election' and 'choice' imply some degree of the will of the people. He also emphasises that the Romans' choice must be based on merit ('desert'). Even though he uses the word 'fight', this may be in a metaphorical sense. If it is used more literally, then it hints at how deeply embedded violence is in the Roman psyche. This aspect comes into play more acutely later on in this section.

Hadfield expands further upon Bassianus's speech:

The words of Bassianus, which sound very like the ideal of the 'mixed constitution' current in Sir Thomas Smith's writings and elsewhere in Elizabethan political thought, are unworkable without a political will to enforce them. The play shows that the republic is reverting to the bad model of the tyrannical monarchy enforced by the Tarquins, foolishly surrendering the liberty it has gained of its own volition.⁷¹

By 'mixed constitution', he means that all sectors of the population have some kind of representation, in addition to there being a monarch. This monarch, by implication, has to listen to his subjects. Bassianus's views are more egalitarian and Marcus's speech is a contrast to this, wherein he appeals to the elites to elect someone deserving, in this case, Titus, who has served his country admirably.

⁷⁰ Hadfield, A. (2005): 157.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 161.

Marcus refers to the Roman military tradition from the very outset of his speech, which exhorts fellow Romans to choose Titus as emperor:

Marcus Andronicus: A nobler man, a braver warrior,
Lives not this day within the city walls.
He by the senate is accited home
From wear wars against the barbarous Goths,
That with his sons, a terror to our foes,
Hath yoked a nation strong, trained up in arms. (I. i.25-30)

Marcus refers to the Senators (who are elected from the elite classes) and he himself is a Tribune, yet another anachronism as the tribunes were traditionally from the plebeian classes, as exemplified in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. Titus had acquitted himself well in the wars against the Goths. However, his prowess as a military leader may not translate well to peace time leadership. Shakespeare examines this issue in greater depth in *Coriolanus*. It becomes evident as the play progresses that Titus's adherence to Roman beliefs and codes of behaviour have deep ramifications politically and, as a result of his rigidity, Rome is in a precarious position, leaning away from republicanism towards the more authoritarian state of the empire.

Firstly, Titus chooses an emperor based on the Roman tradition (or patriarchal tradition) of primogeniture; his choice, Saturninus, is obviously self-serving unlike his brother, who vows to be accountable and to lead competently. Saturninus's war talk has impressed Titus, who judges leaders on their military strength. He does not realise that peace time leadership requires different qualities in a monarch. In this way, Shakespeare questions 'virtus'. While not diminishing the bravery of someone like Titus, saving Rome from the clutches of the Goths, he is fully aware of the dangers that arise from the severity and cruelty of 'virtus'. Secondly, in Act 1, Titus's senseless and ultimately pointless killing of his own son, and the sacrifice of Tamora's son, reveal a blind adherence to tradition or ideology and Shakespeare calls this unquestioning acceptance into question. The ensuing conflict and chains of revenge are the inevitable result.

Bassianus's murder and Lavinia's rape and dismemberment are symbolic of the republic in its death throes as it lurches towards tyrannical empire. Steph Reeves sees the Roman

republic as represented by Lavinia, who has been set upon by those jockeying for power and bent on revenge, a cycle begun by Titus:

Her mutilation at the hands of her rapists, Chiron and Demetrius, leaves her with arms 'lopped and hewed...thy body bare' and 'her tongue cut out', 'ravished'. Through this act of extreme male violence, patriarchal social codes are inscribed onto her body; she becomes a 'map of woe' (III.ii.1.12), whose bodily mutilation represents the decay of Rome's political infrastructure.⁷²

Lavinia's rape also forms a parallel with the rape of Lucrece: however, Lavinia's rape and dismemberment is indicative of the decay of the Roman republic, while Lucrece's violation leads to the liberation of Rome from the Tarquins.

At the end of the play, there is little redemption for Rome. Lucius takes over as leader, by military force, with the help of the Goths. However, Aemilius does mention that he has popular support in Act V, scene iii: 'Come, come, thou reverent man of Rome / And bring our emperor gently in thy hand, / Lucius our emperor; for well I know / the common voice do cry it shall be so'. (V.iii.136-140). Although Lucius speaks in harmonious terms, indicating that his rule will be more compassionate, promising 'To heal Rome's harms, and wipe away her woe' (V.iii.148-149) his last lines veer towards retribution.

The two Goth characters both meet ignominious ends, a culmination of their cruel and amoral behaviour. The Goths are often labelled by the Roman characters as 'barbarous'. However, Titus's killing of his son and sacrifice of Tamora's son, as well as his murder of his daughter, reflect the cruelty and violence of many Roman codes of behaviour. Shakespeare makes the point that Goths and Romans are equally barbarous, despite the Roman 'othering' of the Goths. In this way, Shakespeare has much to say about national identity (and its dangers, one of them being xenophobia).

Nationalism and xenophobia remain prevalent in the twenty-first century. Trump's 'dog-whistling' of white right-wingers and 'othering' of minorities, with his emphasis on building a fortress-like wall along the Mexican border and his heavy-handedness in dealing with Black

⁷² Reeves, Steph. 'The Female Body as a Political Territory in William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*'. *The Literatureblog* (2018). <https://interpretingliterature.com/2018/08/10/the-female-body-as-a-political-territory-in-shakespeares-titus-andronicus/>.

Lives Matter protests all attest to this. The UK's real reason for Brexit, an aversion to increasing immigration, is another case in point, as is the xenophobic violence in South Africa, which always seems to flare up during economic downturns. In *Titus*, Shakespeare illustrates the lack of empathy between the opposing groups and the intrinsic sense of superiority of the politically and economically dominant. He shows us the unfounded nature of this sense of superiority – in that both groups commit the most terrible atrocities. He further shows us, through the ending of *Titus*, that revenge politics only leads to more revenge. This is a parallel with contemporary events. The ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel is an effective example of a violent conflict resulting from lack of empathy, of only seeing the opposing group as the Other. The increasing violence of the far right in America also has a basis in 'othering'. White supremacists do not want minorities to have the same privileges that they enjoy.

Julius Caesar⁷³

There is a wealth of detail in *Julius Caesar* regarding contestation over political power and the concept of *vox populi*, which allows Shakespeare to examine tyranny or would-be tyranny. Some scholars, such as Rackin and Tillyard, are of the opinion that Shakespeare eschewed politics and was merely a mouthpiece for Tudor pro-monarchy propaganda; as with his English history plays and the other Roman plays, however, this is clearly not so. The core issue at the heart of *Julius Caesar* is the debate over whether or not tyrannicide is justified.

Once again, Shakespeare is drawing parallels between renaissance politics and the politics of ancient Rome. The play opens with a reference to Caesar's triumph over Pompey and the civil wars that led to Caesar's rise to power. For Elizabethan audiences, familiarity with full-blown civil war was limited to oral or written history; yet, although the Wars of the Roses had occurred a century before, factionalism was still a problem in Shakespeare's time, reviving fears of civil war and culminating in the Essex rebellion.

The civil wars in Rome arose because of the rise to power of the army generals, who amassed enormous power, leading to rivalry for dominance. Caesar's triumph arose from

⁷³ Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*, ed. T.S. Dorsch (London: Arden Edition, 1979). All of the subsequent references to this play come from this edition.

this situation. Although the monarchs of Shakespeare's time and immediately prior were not 'soldier-leaders' in the mould of Henry V and Richard III, Elizabeth especially presided over massive armies, with overseas exploration and subjugation of Ireland growing in intensity. Shakespeare's age saw the beginning of England's colonialism. In that sense there is a distinct parallel between Elizabethan England and the Roman Empire.

In the opening scenes of *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare shows us a dichotomy of opinions. Marcellus and Flavius chide the citizens for their blind allegiance to Caesar. In reply to the cobbler, Marcellus exclaims, 'Wherefore rejoice (I.i.32-33)?' He is outraged that they have forgotten Pompey and his sons, loyal Romans of the old guard. We see that the tribunes have an entirely different view from the commons. Even though the tribunes come from the same stratum of society as the plebeians, their views are diametrically opposed to those of the ordinary citizens. Here Shakespeare is deviating from Plutarch. Plutarch depicted the commons as 'fearful' of Caesar's rise to power, whereas Shakespeare shows conflicting views from the same class. The two tribunes are 'fearful' as were Plutarch's commons, but the general populace in *Julius Caesar* oppose the anti-Caesar sentiments of Marcellus and Flavius – and embrace Caesar wholeheartedly.⁷⁴ Throughout the play, the plebeians are portrayed as fickle and brutal, whereas Flavius and Marcellus represent the more traditional Roman republican view. They foresee that Caesar will 'keep us all in servile fearfulness' (I.i.75).

Shakespeare shows a critical attitude towards the commons through his aristocratic and royal characters, in *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* as well as many of the English history plays, such as *Richard II*. Cleopatra describes them in withering terms (with 'greasy aprons'[*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.249]) and Coriolanus calls them 'rats' and 'curs' (*Coriolanus*, I.i.168,174). Shakespeare is perhaps commenting on upper-class attitudes to the poor, illustrating how they are seen as a faceless multitude, whose lives or opinions don't matter; yet individual commoners are given a more dignified portrayal, for example the tribunes in *Julius Caesar*, the three citizens in *Coriolanus* and Jack Cade's critical cohorts in *Richard II*.

The patrician class supplied the Roman generals, who were also far away from Rome, conquering distant lands. In this way, they managed to gain a strong following from their

⁷⁴ Willson, R. 'Shakespeare on Film: The Populist *Julius Caesar*'. *Shakespeare Bulletin*. Volume 13, no. 3 (1995): 37.
<http://www.jstor.com/stable/26352790>.

men (mostly of the plebeian class) which augmented their own personal power.⁷⁵ Pompey, Crassus and Caesar formed the first triumvirate which fell apart on Crassus's death, resulting in in-fighting. Pompey and his sons went on to fight against Caesar, with Caesar ultimately being victorious.⁷⁶

Some scholars, particularly those favouring the idea of Shakespeare producing pro-Tudor propaganda, supporting the divine right of kings, have argued that this is in line with the claim that it was Caesar's destiny to become king:

Both Phillips and Whitaker actually develop the point of view of M. W. McCallum, who saw Caesar as a man of destiny designated by God to bring unity to Rome under a monarchy, since the republic was in a state of decay and could no longer serve the needs of an expanding Rome, and who held that Shakespeare shared the view that for Rome to achieve greatness the monarchy of Caesar was inevitable.⁷⁷

The mere fact that the conspirators existed points to the inevitability of Caesar's 'kingship'. If they felt that there were other alternatives to his dictatorship, they would not have resorted to the desperate measure of assassination. Brutus's agonising over this decision attests to this view, as does Shakespeare's sympathetic treatment of Brutus. This inevitability is also clear from the opening of the play, where the two tribunes are presented as much more sensible than the mechanicals whom they are addressing. Flavius and Marcellus express tacit disapproval of Caesar's 'triumph'. They chase home the common people and remove all of Caesar's 'trophies' from the statues.

In Cassius's conversation with Brutus in Act II, scene i, he reminds Brutus that 'I was born as free as Caesar; so were you'. In this way, Shakespeare reminds us of the egalitarian philosophy of the Romans (at least among the patricians). Brutus sees this philosophy as being central to Rome and he is distraught that Caesar is aiming to overturn this. We see his anguish in the same conversation with Cassius:

⁷⁵ Cantor, Paul. *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy: The Twilight of the Ancient World*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017): 30.

⁷⁶ Goldfarb, Styr, P. 'Continual Factions: Politics, Friendship and History in *Julius Caesar*'. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Volume 66, no. 3 (2015): 287. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24778524>.

⁷⁷ Ribner, Irving. 'Political Issues in *Julius Caesar*'. *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. Volume 56, no. 1 (Jan 1957): 11. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27706860>.

Brutus: Nor construe any further my neglect,
Than that poor Brutus, with himself at war. (I.ii.44-45)

In the notes of the Arden edition of *Julius Caesar*, TS Dorsch adds that 'Brutus is at war with himself because his love for Caesar conflicts with his love of freedom'.⁷⁸ It is this personal conflict that leads him to join the conspirators in plotting Caesar's assassination. Underlying the war within himself is the knowledge that the only way to prevent tyranny is through Caesar's death. Caesar's words in subsequent acts lead the audience to realise that Brutus's fears are well-founded. Caesar has a clear aim of becoming sole ruler.

The fear of tyranny is a valid one. Before the advent of democracy, in both Roman times and in the age of Shakespeare, the only way to rid a country of a tyrannical leader or a potential tyrant was through assassination. They couldn't be voted out and even imprisonment wasn't a solution as there would always be supportive factions who would stage a violent insurrection to liberate their leader. Today, in most democratic countries, tyrannical or tyrannically-inclined leaders can be voted out. Trump's election loss clearly illustrates this concept. Unfortunately, being the populist leader that he is, he could not accept his loss of power and tried every means at his disposal to overturn the election result. These were initially democratic means (the courts – which did not entertain his lack of evidence) but he eventually resorted to force (as much as he could legally get away with) in his coercion of Pence and his incitement of the Capitol insurrection on 6 January 2021.

However, democracy today has led to the tyranny of the majority, in some cases. Populist leaders persuade their followers through propaganda, and with the power of social media this propaganda is amplified on an enormous scale. The use of algorithms and the assistance of Russian hackers (who support fellow would-be dictators) further increase the reach of this propaganda. It is these methods that helped to propel Trump to power in 2016 and also ensured a Brexit win in the UK in 2014.

The Republicans' base is now shrinking as America becomes more diverse. In order to enforce white rule, they have resorted to voter suppression and gerrymandering of voting districts. Populist leaders also go after their rivals single-mindedly. Trump's smear campaign against Hillary Clinton and his harassment of Joe Biden through his son's

⁷⁸. Dorsch, T.S. Introduction, in Shakespeare, W. *Julius Caesar* (1979): 10.

activities in the Ukraine exemplifies this, as does Putin's hounding of Alexei Navalny. As Russia is a *de facto* dictatorship, Putin could embark on attempted assassination with impunity. Navalny would be Putin's Cassius. All authoritarian leaders dislike rivals or dissenters who are thinkers.

Cassius, who Caesar describes as having a 'lean and hungry look' (I.ii.191), is a thinker and labelled 'dangerous' (I.ii.192) for this reason – by the same would-be dictator. He also recognises Caesar's ambitions for sole rulership, underlined by his remarks to Brutus:

Cassius: Why man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs, and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves. (I.ii.133-136)

Cassius knows that the only way he can persuade Brutus to join the conspiracy is to appeal to his love for Rome. Brutus will only act if he feels that the populace is behind him. Cassius deviously sends Brutus fraudulent letters to persuade him that the people are in favour of any act that would rid Rome of tyranny (i.e. Caesar's attempt at kingship). The conspirators are well aware of Brutus's standing among the people of Rome and that he would lend credence to an act of murder. It would then become a selfless act for the good of Rome. Casca's words underline this:

Casca: O, he sits high in all the people's hearts:
And that which would appear offence in us,
His countenance, like richest alchemy,
Will change to virtue and to worthiness. (I.iii.157-160)

Importantly, Shakespeare gives much evidence throughout the first acts of the play that Caesar, if given the kingship, will be a tyrant: Caesar refuses to stand when the senators walk in; he refers to himself in the third person; the tribunes are silenced for denuding the statues of Caesar's 'trophies'; his refusal to come to the Capitol is simply put down to his 'will' and Brutus's petition on behalf of Cimber is not considered at all, but roundly rejected in the manner of a king's decree.

Shakespeare, through Brutus's dilemma, presents the problem of removing a dictator or would-be dictator from power. Caesar would obviously not step down willingly, even with

pressure from the senators and the populace. As noted, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (unlike in Plutarch's account), the plebeians are firmly behind Caesar, although they do seem overjoyed at his refusal of the crown. This may have been Caesar's testing of the populace's approval of his ambitions. Shakespeare's depiction of the fickle nature of the mob may possibly be to illustrate a further problem: what if the people want something that is not in the general interest, something contrary to the underpinning tenets of the republic? Caesar's reluctant refusal of the crown (according to Casca) offered three times by Antony is evidence enough of his seduction by power. The mere fact of Antony's offer means that there is also a powerful faction which supports him. His murder, therefore, would result in a backlash from this faction, which is exactly what happens.

In *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare asserts Machiavelli's notion of the ideal prince having the qualities of the fox and the lion: cunning as well as strength. Caesar displays both of these qualities to some extent: firstly, in his wooing of the plebeians, knowing that he would need their support in achieving his aims; and secondly, his military strength, which assured his rise to power. However, his supreme egotism and obsession with becoming king causes his downfall. Decius Brutus tempts him to come to the Capitol with promises of a crown and he cannot resist this.

Nevertheless, Cassius displays more Machiavellian characteristics than Caesar. For him, political expediency is all-consuming. He is determined to ensure that Caesar is stopped in his tracks – even persuading an honourable man to murder his best friend.

In contrast, Brutus is an idealist, who is trying to preserve the Roman republic. However, his naivete causes his own downfall. He shows a lack of political acumen and foresight in believing that an assassination will preserve Roman ideals and not be followed by a further spiral of violence. John Palmer writes:

‘His convictions required him to take the lead in a political conspiracy which, for its success, called for greater agility of mind, a deft and callous adjustment of means to ends, acceptance of the brutal consequences which attend an act of violence, and insight into the motives of men less scrupulous and disinterested than himself. In all these respects he was deficient.’⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Palmer, J. *The Political and Comic Characters of Shakespeare*. (London: Macmillan, 1945): 1.

Brutus's brooding, thoughtful nature sets him apart from the other conspirators. His oration to the people is very cerebral and he comes across as distant, whereas Antony manages to tap into the mood of the people and he engages fully with them.

Shakespeare treats Brutus sympathetically at times, depicting his inner turmoil over what to do about Caesar and whether or not he should join the conspirators. Ribner elaborates:

Plutarch had pictured Brutus as the would-be saviour of his country. This Shakespeare follows. He censures Brutus not for his ends, but for the means he uses to attain those ends.⁸⁰

Brutus and Antony both address the multitude after the death of Caesar. Shakespeare shows us that Brutus lacks Machiavellian political expediency in his naïve underestimation of Antony's threat. Brutus's fellow conspirators, particularly Cassius, advise him not to let Antony speak, but he goes against their wishes. Cassius proposes that they murder Antony too – he correctly foresees that Antony's support for Caesar will not end with the latter's death. Brutus, ever the idealist, rejects this course as being too violent.

In his address to the populace, Brutus appeals to the people's sense of reason. He approaches his justification of the assassination in very cerebral terms. His idealism prevents him from seeing reality: it is impossible to appeal to the masses in intellectual terms. Shakespeare depicts the mob as anti-intellectual, responding only to emotive manipulation as they do with the opportunistic Antony. Brutus speaks in prose, which already diminishes his position in comparison with Antony, whose speech is in a more poetic form. The content of his speech is fairly abstract – he tries to convince the citizens that his motive was love for Rome and its people. Brutus says that they would 'die all slaves' (III.ii.24) were Caesar to remain ruler, but he is very vague and does not lay out his argument in detail. He does not give any specifics about Caesar's ambition and his speech is far shorter than that of Antony. Antony, on the other hand, repeats his sarcastic refrain of Brutus being an 'honourable man (III.ii.84-101)'. His intricate and graphic description of Caesar's gruesome death immediately turns the crowd against the conspirators. He gives a detailed argument, refuting Caesar's ambition to become king with his repeated refusal of the crown. His frequent use of rhetorical questions hits home and the mob reacts angrily.

⁸⁰ Ribner, I. (1957): 18.

In this scene, Shakespeare shows us the danger of incitement of the mob. In their uncontrolled anger, stirred up by Antony, they kill Cinna the poet after mistaking him for one of the conspirators. Shakespeare further illustrates, through Antony, the untrammelled power of the army generals, making it impossible to revive the high ideals of the republic. We see this in the ensuing civil war, where Antony defeats the conspirators and eventually establishes a second triumvirate, paving the way for the rise of empire. However, there is a contradiction in that Rome was still a republic at the same time as it was building an empire. The army generals had amassed their power through their conquest of vast swathes of territory for Rome. An imperial power based on militarism, such as Rome, may not necessarily become politically unstable. Julius Caesar initiated this instability by departing from political norms – the ‘mixed constitution’ of giving the patricians and the plebeians a political voice – that had kept Rome stable for generations. Caesar intended overturning all of this by diluting the power of the senators and concomitantly the plebeians’ voices would also be silenced.

England was also an imperial power, with colonialism in its initial stages as Shakespeare was writing. However, she remained relatively politically stable as the political norms that had been established up till then were adhered to. There was a peaceful handover of power from one monarch to the next, with parliament having more of a political voice as time went by. However, England’s wealth and power was built on the subjugation of others in order to maintain her colonial empire. Unfortunately, the ‘othering’ resulting from such subjugation has become entrenched in the collective British psyche. The natural conclusion to this resulting sense of supremacy was the Brexit vote. The immigration Issue was the underlying reason for this exit as the Brexiteers wanted to keep the descendants of the people they had conquered in their own countries (or, at least, in mainland Europe).

The US can also be considered an imperial power. After World War II, America came out of her isolation, especially with the advent of the Cold War. In order to keep communism at bay (ostensibly, sometimes a smoke screen for protection of economic interests) she became involved in conflicts around the globe, supporting the anti-communist factions. America’s oil interests meant that she became involved militarily in Middle East conflicts. Her support for Israel exacerbated the conflicts in this region. In this way, she became an imperial power. The US was officially declared as ‘Global Policeman’ in 1990 after the fall of the Berlin Wall and communism ended in the Soviet Union and its satellite states.

America was also founded on conquest and violence. Native Americans (First Nations) were decimated in a genocide, in order to secure land for the incoming settlers. The USA's economic rise in the agricultural sector was based on slavery, the after-effects of which still reverberate today. Unlike the UK, the United States' greatest threat of instability comes from within, from far-right violence, according to their Homeland Security Secretary, Alejandro Majorkas. The country's unresolved institutional racism came to a head in 2020, with the death of George Floyd sparking major unrest across the country. Far right groups, such as 'The Proud Boys', fanned the flames of this unrest. The far-right threat had been there for many years, on the fringe, but flaring up every so often, with terrorist attacks such as the McVeigh bombing in Oklahoma City in 1995. Trump courted these groups and they make up a large portion of his support base. He has caused them to move from the fringe to the mainstream, culminating in the violent insurrection of January 6, 2021. Trump's attempts at overturning the election results deviated from the norm of a peaceful handover of power. In this way, like Julius Caesar, he caused political instability.

Many of the members of these far-right groups are army veterans or military personnel presently serving. The philosophy of 'virtus' is intrinsic to these groups, who are highly militarised, firm believers in white supremacy and – like Coriolanus – are unable to empathise with the Other.

Coriolanus⁸¹

The concept of *vox populi* is central to *Coriolanus*. Shakespeare portrays the commons as both individuals (as seen particularly in Act I, scene i and Act III) and a fickle amorphous mass (although not brutal, as in *Julius Caesar*). They are easily manipulated by the tribunes. This is also one of the few Shakespearean dramas in which the concept of 'virtus' is examined in depth. Shakespeare also places emphasis on the different segments of Roman society and how inter-dependent they are. He explores the idea that this inter-dependence is an integral part of maintaining the balance of power in a society.

The play is set in the early days of the Roman republic. The Tarquin kings have been driven out (Coriolanus played a part in this as a young boy) and republican political structures

⁸¹ Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*, eds: J. Bate and E. Rasmussen. (London: RSC Edition, Macmillan, 2011).

have been established. Two consuls would rule on a rotational basis (they would come from the Senate which was made up of the patrician class). The play opens with tribunes having just been chosen (Brutus and Sicinius) after demands for representation from the plebeians. The tribunes would come from the plebeian class.

For the patricians, it was difficult to let go of the past. Volumnia, especially, carries prejudices against the plebeians as a consequence of her upbringing and class. Coriolanus mentions in Act III, scene ii how she would refer to them as 'woollen vassals.' Volumnia has been steeped in the Roman philosophy of 'virtus'⁸², in which honour is inextricably linked with the very masculine qualities of valour and military prowess. She has unquestioningly internalised these values and has inculcated them into her son, who has certainly lived up to them with his bravery shown in the wars against Corioli in particular. He has proved himself as an heroic war-time leader but his attributes do not translate well to peace-time leadership. Volumnia has never encouraged her son to develop fully the 'pietas' aspect of Roman philosophy, which is linked with religious piety as well as respect for the natural social order and devotion to others. She has been obsessed with his 'honour' which comes through triumph in battle as seen by her neurotic counting of his wounds. Her proud reaction to Young Martius pulling wings off butterflies gives us an idea of the kind of upbringing that Coriolanus himself had.

Shakespeare shows us the inner psychology of Coriolanus through his interactions with others, rather than through a series of soliloquies, as he does with Hamlet and Macbeth. Coriolanus nonetheless exhibits a certain degree of interiority. His words to Volumnia: 'Why did you wish me milder? Would you have me false to my nature? Rather say I play the man I am' (III.ii.15-17) illustrate that he has been wrestling with the conflict between his war time and peace time selves. Coriolanus never confides in anyone, not even the audience; he is very much alone, especially on the eve of his exile where he refers to himself as a 'lonely dragon' (IV.i.33).

The pride his mother has instilled in him has gone beyond his love for Rome and is much more inward-looking. His eventual betrayal of Rome brings this pride into question, for which Anne Barton attempts to answer:

⁸² Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*, eds: J. Bate and E. Rasmussen. (London: RSC Edition, Macmillan, 2011): 3-6 (Introduction).

In a sense, the possibility of such a betrayal has been present throughout Coriolanus's adult life. It is bound up with his essential and crippling solitariness, and also with his failure ever to consider how much his heroism has truly been dedicated to Rome as a city, and how much to his own self-realisation and personal fame.⁸³

Self-interest is another attribute of a leader which is depicted by Shakespeare in a negative light, as discussed previously. Coriolanus's pride and self-interest has cut him off from his fellow Romans, both from his own class and from the plebeians.

Coriolanus becomes defined according to his military prowess and he seems to be a one-dimensional fighting machine, as he has not been allowed to develop his humanity. The philosophy of 'virtus' has so imbued his psyche, that human feelings (the 'pietas' aspect) have been suppressed. Through Coriolanus, we see that 'virtus' is a de-humanising, cruel sort of philosophy. His mother has instilled her own prejudices against the plebeians into her son. She has ensured Coriolanus a lack of ordinary human interaction. She even controls his relationship with his wife (for whom he seems to have a very tender affection; his exchanges with her are among the few times that we see his humanity). Coppélia Kahn emphasises Volumnia's deeply entrenched identification with Rome's patriarchy, so that the values of the state are inculcated into her son through her:

Insofar as Volumnia acts within the established feminine parameters by bearing and rearing a son, the play conforms to conventional gender binarism. Her complicity with Roman militarism is no less conventional. But it is precisely because Volumnia holds such power over her son as a mother that her advocacy of the dominant martial ideology gives her a crucial political leverage. As a mother, she is of course subjected by the dominant ideology – but she is also instrumental to it, and thus central to the play's critique of 'virtus'.⁸⁴

The play brings into view the possible role that women may play in the political life of the city. Through the formative influence and control that Volumnia has over her son, she wields as much power politically as Menenius, even though she does not have a formal political position – women were forbidden from participating in law-making or governing.

⁸³ Barton, A. 'Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*' in Alexander, C., ed. *Shakespeare and Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 74.

⁸⁴ Kahn, Coppélia. *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women*. (London: Routledge, 1997): 147.

She possesses the fox-like cunning that Machiavelli believes is an essential requisite for political leadership. Although she despises the plebeians as much as her son does, she, like Menenius, realises the importance of the plebeians in Roman political life. In this sense, she follows Machiavellian 'realpolitik' (not his term of course, although he first defined the concept that it describes) in which the end is more important than the means. Volumnia suppresses her disgust for the plebeians, knowing that they are needed for the maintenance of patrician power, particularly that of her son. She persuades Coriolanus to act similarly, but he is so steeped in the philosophy of 'virtus' that it is impossible for him to assume a conciliatory stance. It is also confusing for him, as the propaganda he has been immersed in for his entire life has now been reversed. In the last Act, she almost single-handedly saves Rome, by persuading Coriolanus to abandon his attack on Rome. In pleasing his mother, finally leaning towards *pietas*, he signs his own death warrant. Through Volumnia, Shakespeare is also showing that the personal and the public in the republic cannot be divorced from each other. In persuading her son to act with humanity, she has saved Rome but has sacrificed her son.

Through highlighting the inhumane aspects of 'virtus' Shakespeare warns audiences of the dangers of untrammelled militarism. He emphasises the importance of dialogue, especially between the different classes. Menenius is a foil for Coriolanus. He talks to the plebeians far more kindly than Coriolanus does. Even though his 'belly and members' speech is hypocritical and false, as the patricians are hoarding corn, to drive up the price, he manages to win the plebeians over to his side by reassuring them. Arguably he despises the plebeians as much as Coriolanus and Volumnia do, as his description of 'the big toe of the assembly' (I.i.160) illustrates, yet he knows that their votes are needed and therefore they must be placated. Even though his tone is light and bantering, his feelings towards the plebeians are not dissimilar to those of Coriolanus. This is especially evident in Menenius's words to Volumnia ('Before he should thus stoop to the herd' [III.ii.39]). The difference is that Menenius is very much aware of how important it is, politically, to keep the plebeians onside. Later in the play, he negotiates with the plebeians and the tribunes on Coriolanus's behalf; he also tries to convince Coriolanus not to attack Rome, but is rejected. Through the comparison of the two characters, Shakespeare illustrates the importance of social interaction and dialogue. Besides needing their votes, the patricians need the plebeians to participate in Rome's wars with external enemies such as the Volsces. Shakespeare depicts the plebeians' case as a valid one:

First Citizen: We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good; what authority surfeits on would relieve us. If they would yield us but the superfluity while it were wholesome, we might guess they relieved us humanely: but they think we are too dear: the leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory to particularize their abundance: our sufferance is a gain to them. Let us revenge this with our pikes, ere we become rakes. For the gods know, I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge. (I.i.14-24)

Even though the citizens are not named, they speak as individuals and Shakespeare presents their petitions positively. However, as soon as they become collectively manipulated by the tribunes, Shakespeare refers to them once more, in the stage directions, as 'the rabble'. This occurs later in Act III. In this first speech, however, many truths are pointed out. It is true that they are 'accounted poor citizens' and that the social structure favours the patricians. A very reasonable request is made for the 'superfluity' of the grain to be given to the poor and for them to be treated 'humanely'. The first citizen rightly points out that the plebeians are suffering for the gains of the rich. He closes his argument by saying that he is motivated simply by hunger and no 'thirst for revenge'.

Coriolanus, whom the first citizen describes as 'chief enemy to the people', lives up to the moniker given to him, by immediately calling them 'dissentious rogues', 'rubbing the poor itch of your opinions, making yourselves scabs'. He uses disease imagery to describe them, openly voicing his contempt - and for him their opinions are worthless. This reaction completely undercuts Menenius's eloquent efforts to placate them and forms a dramatic contrast. However, both are shown to be poor leaders: Menenius, for dismissing their anguish by lying to them, albeit kindly; and Coriolanus, for his cruelty in not acknowledging their plight - he is honest, but brutally so. Unlike Menenius, he does not even hear what they have to say.

This scene is Shakespeare's invention as the original conflict in Plutarch's account was based on usury. In Plutarch's account, the plebeians returning from the Sabine wars had to face their creditors, who had racked up the commons' debts with high interest rates. They revolted against this and in the ensuing conflict, Rome's enemies attacked. Some Roman senators felt that there should be debt forgiveness, but Martius did not – the grain crisis in

Rome followed shortly upon this.⁸⁵ However, Shakespeare made this scene more vivid for his Jacobean audiences by transforming it into a conflict over grain only, leaving out the usury crisis – he may have felt that this was too complicated and that the grain crisis would resonate more vividly with his audiences. He based scene i on the English Midland riots over grain shortages in 1607, as David George explains:

While Shakespeare relied on Plutarch for his narrative and his main military and political events, he filled in passage after passage with Jacobean England. This is not so much a question of ‘relevance’ as an artistic method of creating immediacy for his audience and of winning their involvement. Simply, they would not have understood references to ancient Roman customs and practices. Yet so deft is Shakespeare’s hand in touching on contemporary London and England that literary archaeologists have had trouble even identifying the Jacobean artefacts. Even so, the ‘company of mutinous citizens’ armed with a mixture of London street weapons and farm implements that bursts onto the stage in Act I would have been startlingly contemporary to the first audience. Their hunger and demands for cheap corn, and Coriolanus’s desire to hang them, would have doubled the effect.⁸⁶

In this scene and others, Menenius and the tribunes play an important role. It is through the negotiations between these two entities that Shakespeare brings into sharp relief the ‘mixed constitution’ that was mentioned earlier. Through the often-tortuous interactions between Menenius, Sicinius and Brutus, Shakespeare clearly shows the importance of the balance of power between the patricians and the plebeians.

Paul Cantor elaborates further:

The net effect of the mixed composition of the Roman parties is to check the potentially extreme spiritedness of the patricians. First the appetitive men with the patrician class work to restrain the immoderate pride of some of their party. If the patricians cannot control one of their number, the power of the tribunes comes into play, as shown in the rejection of Coriolanus as consul and his eventual banishment. The Roman parties must be understood to function as a classic example of a system of checks and balances.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ George, David. ‘Plutarch, Insurrection, and Dearth in *Coriolanus*’ in Alexander, C., ed. *Shakespeare and Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 110.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 124.

⁸⁷ Cantor, P. *Shakespeare’s Rome: Republic and Empire*. (New York: Cornell University Press. 1976): 70. Cantor’s terms ‘appetitive’ and ‘spiritedness’ respectively are associated with motivation arising from basic needs as opposed to a more abstract idealism.

In imbuing the text with contemporary events unfolding in Jacobean England, Shakespeare also included King James's reaction to the Midlands grain riots and anti-enclosure uprisings. The King's immediate reaction was to issue proclamations – draconian measures to quell the rebellions. Rebels were charged with sedition or treason. Although, to his credit, he ordered commissions to look into the problems behind these uprisings, he almost always sided with the upper classes.⁸⁸ Shakespeare represents the clashes between the gentleman farmers or upper classes in general and the small farmers and labourers as the clash between the patricians and the plebeians. The forceful quelling of these rebellions and the dearth of grain for the commons engaged Shakespeare's sympathy, as is evident in Act I Scene i.

Shakespeare also warns against the tyranny of the majority in his depiction of the manipulation of the plebeians by the unscrupulous tribunes. They rightly support the plebeians against the prospective tyranny of Coriolanus as consul, but they also abuse their power to deliberately turn the plebeians against Coriolanus in their own self-interest. Brutus underscores this by saying: 'Then our office may, during his power, go sleep.' (II.i.230). They know that if Coriolanus is consul, he will rule autocratically, and their newfound power will be neutralised. This leads them to the deliberate manipulation and exploitation of the plebeians. Their hardened attitudes make Coriolanus dig his heels in further, and they court disaster as Rome is vulnerable and exposed with the banishment of Coriolanus.

Coriolanus, therefore, is Shakespeare's most 'political' play, in which he foregrounds the importance of a balance of power in order to ensure peace and prosperity for all. Shakespeare also emphasises the dangers of one person having too much power, ultimately becoming a destabilising force for a nation at peace.

Daniel Roux argues that the greater danger causing destabilisation is a structural fault in that society rather than the individual's personal qualities or faults: '[Coriolanus] really stands out in Shakespeare's oeuvre for the way it places the crisis as something *innately structural* rather than the result of the actions of individuals.... The play is in fact a very convincing deliberation on the way individual qualities can ignite a pre-existing crisis.'⁸⁹ In

⁸⁸ George, Daniel. 'Plutarch, Insurrection, and Dearth in *Coriolanus*'. in Alexander, C. (Ed). *Shakespeare and Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 114 – 115.

⁸⁹ Roux, Daniel. 'Shakespeare and Tragedy in South Africa: From *Black Hamlet* to *A Dream Deferred*'. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, Volume 27 (2015): 12. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/sisa/article/view/122547>.

my view Coriolanus's tragedy is caused by structural weaknesses in society in combination with Coriolanus's personal qualities. The personal and the public are very much intertwined. Coriolanus's personal qualities, such as his hatred of the plebeians and his pride, result from the teachings of his mother, who in turn has internalised the 'virtus' philosophy of Roman society. The structural weakness in this instance is the inherent conflict between the economic interests of the patricians and those of the plebeians.

CHAPTER FOUR

This chapter will examine a selection of film and stage productions of the Roman plays, paying attention to the contexts in which they were produced and to their subsequent reception. Shakespeare drew parallels between his own historical moment and events that occurred hundreds or even thousands of years prior to this. Similarly, we can go back to Shakespeare to find ‘echoes’ of current global politics. Democracy has been under threat around the world in recent years, with many democratic countries facing the prospect of more authoritarian governance, or even open tyranny, in the guise of populism. This, in turn, resonates with instances of political turbulence in the twentieth century.

The first play I will discuss, *Coriolanus*, has been a site of ‘political’ engagement among theatre makers and audiences alike. This is not a new phenomenon, as Bates and Rasmussen write in the notes of the RSC edition:

Early in 1934, when the French Socialist government was close to collapse, a new translation of *Coriolanus* was staged at the Comédie Française in Paris. The production was perceived as an attack on democratic institutions. Rioting pro- and anti-government factions clashed in the auditorium. Shakespeare’s translator, a Swiss, was branded a foreign fascist. The prime minister fired the theatre director and replaced him with the head of the security police, whose artistic credentials were somewhat questionable.¹

The fact that both sides of the political spectrum could point fingers at the other, over the same play, attests to the power of Shakespeare’s dialectical skills.

It is this very attribute of Shakespeare that inspired Bertolt Brecht to adapt some of his plays, in order to make audiences concentrate on the past that produced the present, based mostly on his theory of historicization. David Barnett elaborates:

Brecht proposed that the theatre ‘historicizes’ its performed material. That is, that directors, actors and set designers are aware that different points in history produce different values, behaviours and opinions. These circumstances can then be shown to an audience, so that they see

¹ Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*, eds: J. Bate and E. Rasmussen. (London: RSC Edition, Macmillan, 2011): 8 (Introduction).

the material in its context and ask questions about the relationship between the two. A production's creative team thus have to carry out historical research in order to understand how the present day differs from earlier periods in order to highlight the differences and show them to the audience.²

The implication here for Shakespearean drama is that the characters (or figures, as Brecht refers to them) are less important than their historical context and all of the values and norms informed by this context. For example, *Coriolanus* would be examined in terms of the society that produced him: his position in the patrician class, his mother's influence and in turn, her interpretation of the Roman philosophy, 'virtus', which informs her values. There is also a gender issue: an absent father and a mother who tries to be both parents, and who seems as if she longs for the battlefield herself. However, Brecht minimised the influence of Volumnia, instead making a straight correlation between *Coriolanus*' class position and his arrogance. It is this background which has fuelled his hatred of the plebeians. Their uprising, in turn, has been caused by material conditions – hunger – thus focusing the play's action on an economic clash with the patricians.

Brecht's theory of historicization determined the narrative of his productions. To use *Coriolanus* as a further example: the audience would be encouraged to think carefully about the clash of classes. The exact details of time and place would fade into the background as the audience was encouraged to focus on this conflict. Shakespeare's ability to present two opposing views make his play apposite to Brechtian ideals. However, Brecht approached the class struggle in *Coriolanus* from the perspective of the plebeians – the patricians were seen as the villains and the plebeians as innocent victims of their machinations. This was underscored by Brecht depicting the tribunes as honourable, whereas in standard readings of the play, although they rightfully represent the plebeians, maintaining their own power is the tribunes' overriding motive.³

Brecht adapted Shakespeare's play, a process facilitated by translation into German, and titled it *Coriolan*. Presenting the play from the plebeians' point of view means moving away

² Barnett, David. *Brecht in Practice* (2017).

<https://brechtinpractice.org/theory/historicization/#:~:text=Brecht%20proposed%20that%20the%20theatre,different%20values%2C%20behaviours%20and%20opinions.&text=The%20aim%20is%20to%20contrast,as%20performed%20in%20the%20present.>

³ Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*, eds: J. Bate and E. Rasmussen. (London: RSC Edition, Macmillan, 2011): 8 (Introduction).

from Shakespeare's focus on the tragic hero. Menenius and the rest of the patrician class are depicted as being in league with Coriolan and they form a united front. As a result, Shakespeare's characters become 'figures' or types and Coriolanus's banishment by his own class as well as the plebeians is lost. Coriolanus, in Brecht's version, becomes very one-dimensional, with Brecht only focusing on his arrogance and pride. Shakespeare's finely nuanced psychological study of the character of Coriolanus is diminished. Diana LaPietra elaborates on this:

It seems, however, that he fails to answer certain important questions posed by Shakespeare's text. How can his typical complete lack of diplomacy be explained in terms of his class consciousness?⁴

Brecht began working on *Coriolan* in April 1951, but the work was unfinished by the time he died in 1956. According to Gregory Rossi:

It is apparent that Brecht became unhappy with the work that he had completed, coming to the realisation that the material of production he had in mind was already represented in Shakespeare's play:⁵

Rossi does not give a definite answer as to why Brecht never completed the work but alludes to the fact that Shakespeare's dialectical style meant that the play examined the two opposing classes with equal weight and that his 'interest lies in the welfare of the whole state rather than any particular class.'⁶ Brecht, by contrast, was only interested in the plebeians and did not wish to convey any sympathy for or with the patrician class.

Half a century after Brecht's stalled adaptation, Ralph Fiennes' 2011 film version – the first ever of this play – merged the psychological analysis of Coriolanus with a strong political theme. In an interview with *Cinéaste* Fiennes mentions his emphasis on both of these aspects:

⁴LaPietra, Diana. *Brecht and Shakespeare: The Coriolan Adaptation*. (MA thesis, Ontario: McMaster University, 1979): 26. <https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/handle/11375/9562>.

⁵ Rossi, Gregory, D. *Shakespeare and Brecht: A Study of Dialectic Structures in Shakespearean Drama and Their Influence on Brecht's Theatre and Dramatic Theory*. (PhD dissertation, London: University of London, 1991): 334. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10108260/1/Shakespeare_and_Brecht_A_stud.pdf.

⁶ *Ibid*, 334.

The actor in me was very keen to explore the interior life of Coriolanus. The interior life of any character, I think is best shown on film ... *Coriolanus* is always going to be pertinent because the power plays of politics will always be with us.⁷

Fiennes emphasises the relevance of the political themes of the play as these are very much intertwined with the character and behaviour of Coriolanus. Perhaps Brecht's failure to do so contributed to the abandonment of his adaptation? Nevertheless, like Brecht, Fiennes covers the political aspects very much from the citizens' perspective – at the time of the first screening of the film, audiences were experiencing world-wide unrest from the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008. Fiennes elaborates, in reply to the interviewer's observation that it almost seems to become an allegory for any political situation:

I completely agree with the first part. I think the play is always relevant, and the film is coming out at a time when there's social and economic uncertainty throughout Europe. People are protesting on the streets of Athens and London and elsewhere. Food prices are going up all over the world, there have been food riots, and there's always a turnabout of power, with frustration expressed by those who are being ruled with those in power holding onto authority. In places like Syria and Russia people aren't even allowed to protest in the streets.⁸

Fiennes sets his film in contemporary times in 'a place calling itself Rome'. Even though the setting is actually Belgrade, Fiennes does not make specific references to the city, but older viewers would be familiar with the former Yugoslavia and the Balkan wars – the news clips of Slabodan Milesóvic add to this. The setting could therefore be anywhere and in this way Fiennes is following Brecht's theory of *Verfremdung* (linked to historicization) where the familiar is made strange. By not specifying a specific year or a specific place, Fiennes is forcing the audience to focus on the events themselves. The 'anywhere' setting informs the conflicts of the film with a universality that Fionnuala O'Neill refers to here.

It is shot mainly in war-damaged Belgrade, and many of the Roman citizens are played by Serbian actors. The formidable Roman military are mostly real-life members of the Serbian counter-terrorist squad, the SAJ; the marauding Volscians become guerrilla fighters embroiled in an ancient and bitter border dispute.

⁷ Crowds, Gary; Porton, Richard and Fiennes, Ralph. 'Shakespeare's Perennial Political Thriller: An Interview with Ralph Fiennes'. *Cinéaste*. Volume 37, no. 2 (Cinéaste Publishers, Spring, 2012): 18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41691120>.

⁸ *Ibid*, 20.

The film vividly recalls the bitter Yugoslav wars, but it also speaks to other conflicts: Northern Ireland; Chechnya. This is reinforced by the multiplicity of nationalities and accents (including Serbian, Northern Irish, South African, English and Scottish) so that echoes of conflicts old and new surface and blend seamlessly.⁹

'A place called Rome' is a city which is driven by media and much of the narrative unfolds through television broadcasts. The cable news station is called 'Fidelis' (meaning 'faithful' or 'true' in Latin). This is the source of news for most of the populace. Instead of the marketplace, all of the political actions of the play are broadcast on television. Menenius is shown to be media savvy, whereas Coriolanus is deeply uncomfortable in front of the camera. However, the fact that Menenius addresses the plebeians through the medium of television rather than directly underscores the distance between the plebeians and the patricians. The plebeians film many of Coriolanus's outbursts on their camera phones, the footage being shown in the film, but the audience does not find out the denouement of these informal videos – we just assume that they are being used to spread condemnation of Coriolanus's actions.¹⁰

Fiennes' film is very much from the perspective of the plebeians. The opening riot scenes focus on their reaction to Martius's oppressive behaviour. The camera tracks with the crowd almost as if we the viewers are walking amongst them. Tamora and Cassius (the first two citizens) are introduced in a personal way, from the start – immediately engaging the viewers' sympathy, so that the plebeians are not just a faceless mob. The posters they carry, picturing Martius's face crossed out, further establish his status as antagonist. The way the police handle the protesters also brings audience sympathy to the plebeians. Protesters are brutally beaten by a vastly better armed police force, who are more like a faceless mob – hidden behind visored helmets. The camera zooms in on some of the beaten protesters, giving them more individuality.

Just as Shakespeare examines the role of military virtue and the military in politics, so does Fiennes. Wierik Jansen concurs:

⁹ O'Neill, Fionnuala. 'Review of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*' (adapted for film and directed by Ralph Fiennes), *Shakespeare*, Volume 8, no. 4 (2012): 456.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17450918.2012.705884>.

¹⁰ Jansen, Wierik. *Media-Controlled Political Arenas: Shakespeare's 'Coriolanus' in Adaptation*. (MA thesis, Leiden: Leiden University, 2020): 21. <https://studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2700352/view>.

Fiennes repeatedly shows that his Coriolanus is a soldier and not a politician. He thrives in the warrior culture of the Volscians, but is abhorred by the Romans who value politics over everything else. When he has to perform the role of politician, Coriolanus cannot comply and he turns to the only emotion that he has been taught: anger.¹¹

Fiennes highlights the differences in political structures between 'Rome' and Antium. In the former, there is a combination of military and civilian rule, but governance is generally based on elections, wherein the plebeians play a major role. Governance of Antium seems to be almost entirely in the hands of the military, which is why Coriolanus feels he belongs there. However, he is unable to reconcile 'pietas' (virtue based on compassion and care for the community) with 'virtus'. Fiennes' bleak ending, with Coriolanus's body being unceremoniously dumped, highlights the fact that the two philosophies are mutually exclusive. The ideals of 'virtus' cannot operate successfully in a peacetime democracy. O'Neill observes that this premise is embodied in the person of Coriolanus:

His return to serve under Aufidius is a reminder that Coriolanus is fundamentally incapable of leadership. His military efficiency has crippled him; he is a war machine, unable to relate to others with the ease necessary for productive relationships.¹²

Fiennes has made his film accessible to a modern audience, especially through the use of media that imbues the work. Like Shakespeare, his theme of political accountability is tightly interwoven with that of the personal – the tragedy of Coriolanus.

An adaptation of *Coriolanus* that never reached production is Steve Bannon's version, entitled *The Thing I Am*, written in collaboration with Julia Jones. Its existence is fairly widely known due to Bannon's prominence in right-wing politics. Bannon was, among other roles, Donald Trump's one-time chief strategist and founder of Breitbart (a right-wing news outlet). The screenplay was written in the late 1990s and traded Roman-Volscian conflict for gang warfare during the time of the Los Angeles race riots. It encompasses black internecine violence, but black versus white conflict is dealt with in the script, as the excerpt below illustrates:

Brutus: Dear? We're cheap, not dear.

¹¹Jansen, W. (2020): 31.

¹² O'Neill, F. (2012): 459.

(to crowd, voice rising)

White folks are dear. Their kibbles
'n' bits would relieve us, but they
Call us 'dear' and cast us nothing.
Our suffering's their gain. Let's
Avenge with guns and knives. I speak from
hunger. Now.....let's do it.

*The crowd CHEERS!*¹³

The closest it came to performance was Hollywood table reads (one in 2006 and another in 2017). Previously the screenplay was withheld from widespread dissemination. Bannon and Jones described their work as showing 'how the culture of greed, elitism, discrimination and inhumanity repeats itself today in a self-defeating replay of atrocities', 'while other analysts have parsed it for insight into Bannon's ideas about authoritarianism and populism.'¹⁴

Coriolanus is depicted as a leader who has the capacity to stop the violence in his own community but lacks the temperament to balance compromise and a strong stand. Rosenberg feels that these ideas 'have a striking resonance with the ways President Trump now talks about American cities and African American communities.'¹⁵ The actor who played Coriolanus, Gary Anthony Williams, felt that Bannon did not have the expertise in street language or African American culture to be able to create an authentic script. Rob Corddry (a fellow actor) agrees with this view: 'I think Steve Bannon thought he had figured out black people, much in the way of Trump ... It almost seemed a way to indulge himself in being racist.'¹⁶

As well as illustrating a lack of research or insight into the finer nuances of black American discourses, it typifies the racism underpinning the assumption that a white person could possibly understand the experiences of an inner-city black person. Bannon further

¹³ Bannon, Stephen. *That Thing I am*, in Pollack-Pelzner. Daniel. 'Behold, Steve Bannon's Hip-Hop Shakespeare Rewrite: *Coriolanus*'. *New York Times*. 17 Dec 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/17/opinion/sunday/steve-bannon-hip-hop-shakespeare-rewrite-coriolanus.html>.

¹⁴ Rosenberg, Alyssa. 'Stephen Bannon wrote a movie about the 1992 L.A. riots. Now, you can finally watch it.' *The Washington Post*. 1 May 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2017/05/01/stephen-bannon-wrote-a-movie-about-the-1992-l-a-riots-now-you-can-finally-watch-it/>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

demonstrates his white supremacist thinking in other parts of the script, fusing his gangs with a 'gang' of workers from a South African gold mine, and then invoking the 'Serengeti':

Mr. Bannon describes the miners' song as a 'cacophony of voices chanting from the Serengeti for a lost homeland' — an American investment banker's fantasy of primitive African manhood, a dance of 'brothers, slaves and manliness in dying.'¹⁷

This shows a lack of respect for Africans, as the assumption is that their countries are not worth the trouble of researching. It ranks alongside Trump's derisive description of African 'shit hole' countries.

Bannon also glorifies the 'strongman' aspect of *Coriolanus*. This, of course, bolsters his populist world view. He embeds extreme violence in the play through the gang-warfare theme. Bannon's thinking is very evident from this script and gives us a glimpse into his influence on Donald Trump. Trump's words and actions have displayed the mode of thought described above — one only has to examine some of the statements made by him on the Black Lives Matter protests in the US in July 2020, notably: 'Carnage! Chicago is carnage! ... American carnage! That I have the answer. That if you could listen to me, this can fix that.'¹⁸ Trump was referencing his inauguration speech wherein he promised to stop the violence resulting from gang and drug related violence in the inner cities. There was a strong racial overtone to both speeches. In 2020, his racism was unabated. White protesters would always be excused, while black protesters were always blamed for any ensuing violence. The January 6, 2021 Capitol insurrection was the culmination of this thinking.

One of the more successful productions of *Coriolanus* in South Africa was the version directed by Debbie Lütge at the Durban University of Technology in 2009. In Brian Pierce's review, he indicates that 'the play became an exploration of the theme of the hero-warrior set against the backdrop of Shakespeare's Rome.'¹⁹ There were two casts, to accommodate a large student cohort, with the tribunes played by two men in one cast and two women in the other. Both casts were all black. The crowd was played by women and as

¹⁷ Pollack-Pelzner, D. 'Behold, Steve Bannon's Hip-Hop Shakespeare Rewrite: *Coriolanus*'. *New York Times*, 17 Dec 2016.

¹⁸ Blistein, Jon. 'He Approaches the Baby Gangsta: Watch Steve Bannon's Rap Musical.' *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 3 May 2017. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/he-approaches-the-baby-gangsta-watch-steve-bannons-rap-musical-115694/>.

¹⁹ Pearce, Brian. 'Review of *Coriolanus*, directed by Debbie Lütge, Durban University of Technology'. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, Volume 21 (April 2009): 83. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/196924356>.

such the production took on the element of the masculine and feminine principles, an embodiment of 'virtus' vs 'pietas.'

Coriolanus was former president Thabo Mbeki's favourite play and Pierce elaborates on the play's relevance to South Africans:

As far as I know, this play has never been performed previously in South Africa. Is this because of Coriolanus' arrogant disdain of the proletariat? Or because of their hostile reaction to him? The play strikes a painful nerve in our history. From Jan Smuts and the striking white miners to Thabo Mbeki and the black trade unions, the play has a curiously telling resonance in South Africa.²⁰

Although the play's significance for Thabo Mbeki is on a more personal level, its relevance for him and other contemporary political figures who were his peers, is particularly striking. An examination of The Robben Island 'Bible' offers to shed more light on this phenomenon.

Anti-apartheid activist Sonny Venkatrathnam was imprisoned on Robben Island in the 1970s and he was allowed one book, which was *Shakespeare's Complete Works*. After going on a hunger strike, his book was confiscated. He explained to the warder that the book was his Hindu 'bible', convincing the guard to return it. Venkatrathnam added an authentic finishing touch to *Shakespeare's Complete Works* by sticking on pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses. This book was passed around among some of the prisoners (34 altogether). They put their signatures next to favourite passages and consequently, this edition was autographed by many of South Africa's stalwart struggle heroes.²¹ However, Mbeki was not among the signatories, as he was a political exile and not a prisoner on Robben Island. This fact has had a significant influence on his political 'brand'. It set him apart from the other struggle heroes, playing a role in his later political isolation.

Although Mbeki referenced *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III* in speeches and publications, his favourite play is *Coriolanus*. Mark Gevisser weaves an analogy

²⁰ Pearce (April 2009): 84.

²¹ Roux, Daniel. 'Shakespeare and Tragedy in South Africa: From Black *Hamlet* to *A Dream Deferred*. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. Volume 27 (2015): 1.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5805e25ed482e93165f6ae42/t/5832b5b2725e2597a56b8065/1479718328730/Daniel+Roux+-+Tragedy+in+SA+and+Coriolanus.pdf>.

between Mbeki and Coriolanus into his biography of the former president, *A Dream Deferred*.

Gevisser explains how Coriolanus's words, 'I play the man I am', had particular resonance for Mbeki who had shared his views on *Coriolanus* with his friend, Rhiannon Gooding in 1969, in letters wherein he told her that he felt 'that Coriolanus was the very model for a 20th century revolutionary'.²² Mbeki admired Coriolanus for his uncompromising honesty, similarly seeing his own people as a 'rabble' or an 'unthinking mob'.²³ Like Coriolanus, Mbeki was not a man of the people, who rather saw him as an aloof intellectual, more involved with his philosophies of the African Renaissance outside South Africa than caring about their welfare. His stance on Aids and his refusal to roll out anti-retroviral drugs alienated him from many in South Africa. His eventual 'recall' and replacement by populist Jacob Zuma at the Polokwane ANC conference in 2008 was a chilling parallel with Coriolanus's banishment.

Mbeki's ideas on Coriolanus are rather curious. Seeing the Roman patrician as a 'revolutionary' is incorrect, as Coriolanus represents the establishment patricians and vehemently rejects any revolutionary ideas, which come from the plebeians. Revolutionaries, after all, putatively represent the common people. The fact that Shakespeare opens his play from the perspective of the citizenry implies his sympathy with them, which is underscored by Caius Martius's hostile, aggressive entrance.

Unsurprisingly, then, South African school and university productions of *Coriolanus* place emphasis on the populist aspects of the play, from the perspective of 'the people' rather than the 'strongman' leader. The IEB (Independent Examinations Board) chose *Coriolanus* as a set work for matriculants in 2016. In response, the National Children's Theatre staged a touring production that travelled to schools around the country. Marguerite De Waal interviewed Nicola Pilkington, co-director of the production, who explained their emphasis on the citizenry:

The creative team interpreted the play as being 'about the citizens, and the students being citizens ... about the vote ... about political responsibility'.³³ The production established an immediate point of identification in the first scene of the play, opening

²² Gevisser, Mark. 'I play the man I am.' *The Sunday Times*, 20 June 1999.

²³ Gevisser, 20 June 1999.

with a chant from disgruntled citizens that 'Martius Must Fall!', echoing the refrain of 'Fees Must Fall'. According to Pilkington, this chanting was particularly powerful when on the schools' tour: actors engaged student audiences, drawing them into identification with the citizenry by moving among them.²⁴

This approach was adhered to in question-and-answer sessions after performances, with pupils being asked to vote on which character they thought wielded the most power. Other Brechtian principles were also drawn into the production: the set was deceptively simple with a few items of furniture and other objects, which were moved around as the scenes demanded. Costuming was similarly done, with coloured scarves to indicate characters and their affiliations. Actors often moved among the audience.

In her review of this production, Tanya Van Der Walt gave a positive response:

The play offers a range of learning opportunities for learners and teachers alike, and I was thrilled to find that IEB schools had the chance to see the play in performance. I fervently believe that Shakespeare's work needs to be taught in a manner that engages with the texts performatively, and my own experience of teaching Shakespeare has always been that a practical, performative engagement with the text almost always engenders a far greater understanding of the play – and a clearer sense of how.²⁵

In contrast to productions aimed at school pupils, university productions often have more creative freedom. Most of them are produced by students or lecturers whose aim it is to prepare students for a career in theatre or film. School pupils need to study the play for examination purposes and therefore benefit more from a conventional production where the original text is adhered to (perhaps cut, but not rearranged).

South African university productions have also focused on the populist aspect of *Coriolanus*. In common with the National Children's Theatre production, Myer Taub's 2017 production of *DCoriolanus* incorporated contemporary protests. At the time, the

²⁴ De Waal, M. 'Close Encounters: Staging *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* in contemporary South Africa'. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. Volume 33(2020): 9. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/sisa/article/view/201827>.

²⁵ Van Der Walt, T. 'Making Shakespeare Useful: A pared-down, portable *Coriolanus*'. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. Volume 28 (2016): 99. <https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.4314/sisa.v28i1.9>.

#FeesMustFall movement was making headlines all over the country so it almost went without saying that this conflict would make its appearance in university theatre productions.

DCoriolanus (a play on the word, 'decolonise') was staged in March 2017 at the Masker Theatre of the University of Pretoria. There were Brechtian touches in the staging of the play, where different areas of the theatre were used for performance – and not just the stage. The audience was invited to take part in auditions for the play, which was performed in fragments in the various spaces allocated.

The March 29 performance took on an entirely different concept of space and staging. One of the leaders of the #FeesMustFall movement was declared *persona non grata* on the university campus and she had been invited to take part in a panel discussion after the performance. To accommodate her, the play was moved to a church hall over the road from the University. Marguerite De Waal explains how this added another dimension to the play:

This led to a moment of unconventional audience participation: we were guided off campus by student actors who led a chant: 'Caius, Martius, Coriolanus'. This worked on two levels. Firstly, the audience was encouraged to participate in the collective voice of the citizenry, juxtaposed with the individual figure of Coriolanus. Secondly, the exodus from campus became a protest in reverse. A chanting crowd in and around campus had become a familiar sight – the goal was to show resistance by occupying campus spaces. In this case, however, resistance meant moving off campus.²⁶

The cast was a multi-racial and multi-lingual one. Taub collaborated with his students, who, with their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, contributed significantly to the production.

DCoriolanus set out to discomfit the audience and force them to confront the student protests that were integrated into the play. Besides being required to move between different areas, they were also included as auditioners and were sometimes compelled to read certain speeches. Brecht's theory of alienation informed the interaction between actors and audience, with the audience being confronted with fragmentary messages, for example a video of Shakespeare on Robben Island as well as different spaces not usually used for performance.

²⁶ De Waal, M. (2020).

Much of the play was translated into different languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana, chiShona, Ndaou and Afrikaans; and, as Yamikani Mahaka-Phiri notes: 'translation into multiple languages contains a paradox, in that it both highlights difference and encourages unification: it 'segregates', while 'at the same time it also integrates'.²⁷ This practice would alienate non-speakers of any given language in the moment that it was spoken but would affirm the speakers of that same language.

Julius Caesar has also lent itself to a myriad of both conventional and experimental productions, with many incendiary reactions to the political themes of the play.

The New York Public Theater's 2017 *Julius Caesar*, directed by Oskar Eustis and performed in Central Park, caused outrage among Trump supporters in the US. Caesar was depicted as Trump (with tell-tale symbols, such as the blond, over-combed hair, the red tie and Eastern European wife). Protesters in the audience disrupted the play and there were numerous threats of violence by prominent right-wing broadcasters and social media users.

The Public Theater is mostly sponsored by private companies, in this case Delta Airlines and Bank of America, both of whom withdrew their support for the play, afraid of losing pro-Trump customers. Delta Issued a statement that the 'graphic staging crossed the line on the standards of good taste' while the Bank of America pulled its sponsorship because 'it was presented in such a way that was intended to provoke and offend'.²⁸

However, of those who were outraged, many had not seen the play or read it. There was an idea that it was like a superhero film where the villain is killed at the end. They missed the fact that Caesar is assassinated less than halfway into the play and the rest deals with the terrible aftermath of his murder. As Chris Thurman notes, referencing McHenry:

Eustis and colleagues repeatedly stated that the play's message is, in fact, primarily aimed at Trump's opponents: 'Our production of *Julius Caesar* in no way advocates violence towards anyone. Shakespeare's play, and our production, make the opposite point: [t]hose who

²⁷ Mahaka-Phiri, 'Towards developing ensemble training' in De Waal (2020): 2.

²⁸ Wilkinson, Alyssa. 'Why outrage over Shakespeare in the Park's Trump-like *Julius Caesar* is so misplaced'. *Vox*, 19 June 2017. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/6/12/15780692/julius-caesar-shakespeare-in-park-trump-public-theater-outrage>.

attempt to defend democracy by undemocratic means pay a terrible price and destroy the very thing they are fighting to save.²⁹

The Acting Company staged a production of *Julius Caesar* at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis in 2012 – this time with Caesar depicted as a Barack Obama stand-in, set against a background of ‘occupy Rome protests’, with black actors in the lead roles. Noah Millman, writing in the *American Conservative*, noted that the play worked by ‘connecting [the play] to ideas that people we know take seriously’.³⁰

This time there was no public outrage and Delta Airlines raised no objections. Consequently, some questions need to be posed in this regard. Perhaps there is an insidious racism at work here? The outrage at the Public Theater production also only came from right-wing sources. Could their intolerance of dissent be a sign of nascent fascism? It may also be that the Barack Obama Caesar was not as clearly identifiable as the Trump Caesar.

Orson Welles tapped into a fascist theme in his ground-breaking production of *Julius Caesar*, in 1937. It was staged in modern dress, had a minimalist set and was intended to educate audiences on the dangerous rise of fascism in Europe at the time. Welles and Houseman (both founders of the Mercury Theatre Company) Issued a statement that was published in the *New York Times*, stating that aesthetics came first and that their company would never choose a play on the basis of political content. Yet their press release also said: ‘our *Julius Caesar* gives a picture of the same kind of hysteria that exists in certain dictator-ruled countries of today. We see the hope on the part of Brutus for a more democratic government vanish with the rise of a demagogue (Antony) who succeeds the dictator.’³¹

²⁹ McHenry, J. ‘Public Theater Issues Statement amid Controversy over Trump-Inspired *Julius Caesar*’. *Vulture*, 12 June 2017. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/06/publictheaterissues-statement-on-trump-like-julius-caesar.html> in Thurman, C. ‘Burying Caesar ... or Praising Him? Shakespeare and the Populist Right in the United States.’ *English Studies in Africa* (2020): 27. 22-44. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00138398.2020.1780749>.

³⁰ Millman, N. ‘American Conservative.’ in Wilkinson, Alyssa. *Vox*, June 2017.

³¹ Orson Welles Website. ‘Orson Welles’ *Julius Caesar*’. (August 2012). <https://www.orsonwelles.org/2012/08/orson-welles-julius-caesar.html>

This performance was more subtle than that of Eustis. The characters could have been any of the fascist groups prominent at the time: Nazis, Italian Fasci or followers of Franco. No one wore a toothbrush moustache. PJ Grisar adds to this:

It may seem improbable to think of a Fascist *Julius Caesar* as somehow subtle or open-ended, but Welles's mark on modern Shakespeare underlines an important takeaway for how to broach the present: Caesar can be (a kind of) Hitler, Caesar can be (a kind of) Trump, but he can't *be* Trump, because Trump could only play one stock role in Shakespeare — that of the clown.³²

Although he is correct in pointing out the dangers of depicting Caesar as a particular (living) person, I would disagree that Trump could only play a clown. Shakespeare's clowns are for the most part perceptive, with a wisdom and sense of justice that belies their outlandish exteriors. One only has to think of Feste in *Twelfth Night* and the Fool in *King Lear*. Trump does not possess these qualities.

The lesson of not pinning down the character of Caesar seems to have been well learned by Robert Hastie, director of a 2017 production at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, UK. Hastie also employed some Brechtian touches, using the arena-like nature of the theatre space, where the audience also became witnesses and citizens. He bulked up the ensemble cast and they moved among the audience as well. The cast was also of a diverse nature, with even some of the gender roles being swapped to contemporise the production – for example, Cassius was played by a female actor (Zoë Waites). The performance was reviewed by Catherine Love of *The Guardian*, writing here in response to the crowd's switching of allegiance from Brutus:

Watched now, as the tide of right-wing populism continues to lap at western democracies, it feels like an uneasy warning. The manipulative power of rhetoric and its ability to incite anger and chaos is at the heart of both Shakespeare's play and Hastie's production. This version of the Roman general's fall is firmly contemporary but deliberately non-specific. Caesar, Brutus, Mark Antony and co are all slick-suited

³² Grisar, PJ. 'Before the Trump-Inspired Julius Caesar, there was Orson Welles's Anti-Fascist Staging. *Hyperallergic*, June 2017. <https://hyperallergic.com/385815/before-the-trump-inspired-julius-caesar-there-was-orson-welles-anti-fascist-staging/>

politicians, striding across the United Nations-style Senate of Ben Stones' design. They could be anywhere in the world, steering any precarious democracy.³³

Theatre critics generally gave the production warm reviews. It is notable that the *Guardian* review engendered much discussion of the dangers of populism in the comments section. Peter Kirwan describes Hastie's mix of community and professional actors – sometimes up to 40 people on stage. He also modernised his production and focused on the populist aspect of the play. Kirwan describes Hastie as 'keen to hammer home the play's now-ness.'³⁴ Dominic Maxwell praised Hastie as 'making the Roman play come alive for the modern age'.³⁵

Julius Caesar's examination of the nature of power, the question of how to rid a country of a dictator and the role of the citizens, have together made it a very popular 'political' play across the world.

More specifically, John Kani, one of South Africa's most eminent actors, famously said that *Julius Caesar* is 'Shakespeare's African play'.³⁶ His reason for saying this is, in part, that it has been a popular choice for translations and performances across the African continent; notably, Julius Nyerere translated it into Swahili and Sol Plaatje translated the play into Tswana. Kani also mentions that his first introduction to Shakespeare was at school, where he studied *Julius Caesar*, translated into isiXhosa by B.B. Mdledle, finding it more powerful than Shakespeare's original text:

It was as if the revolution of knowledge had come into our lives. The purpose of allowing this play to be taught in our native language was to show that if we dared to rise against the establishment (the government) we would all suffer the pain and failure of Brutus, and of all the conspirators who were ultimately defeated by the army of the state – lead by Mark Antony and Octavius. But our teacher taught us differently. He told us that Caesar was ambitious and did not care about the rule of the majority; he was a dictator

³³ Love, C. 'Julius Caesar review – political thriller chimes with rise of populism'. *The Guardian*, 25 May 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/may/25/julius-caesar-review-political-thriller-shakespeare-sheffield-crucible>

³⁴ Kirwan, P. Julius Caesar (Sheffield Theatres) @ the Crucible. *University of Nottingham Blog Post*, June 2017. <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2017/06/01/julius-caesar-sheffield-theatres/>

³⁵ Maxwell, D. 'Theatre review: Julius Caesar at the Crucible, Sheffield'. *The Times*, 25 May 2017. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/theatre-review-julius-caesar-at-the-crucible-sheffield-2k5dgxl9j>

³⁶ Brown, E. Shakespeare's African Play. *Interview Magazine*, 12 April 2013. <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/gregory-doran-julius-caesar-bam>

and would fall, just like the apartheid government of the Afrikaners would. However, he warned us that, during the examinations, we must follow the syllabus as prescribed by the Department of Bantu Education.³⁷

Gregory Doran, following Kani's lead, also believes that *Julius Caesar* is 'Africa's play'. He met with Nelson Mandela (whose signed passage in the Robben Island Bible was: 'Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once') and John Kani. Their conversations on the 'Bible' and the relevance of *Julius Caesar* to Africa, prompted this response from Doran:

If you look at the history of Africa in the last 50 or 60 years since many of the countries gained independence from imperial rule, you get this history of leaders coming to power on a wave of popularity, beginning to gather all that power to themselves, then being overthrown in a military coup that plunges the country into civil war. That's the plot of *Julius Caesar*.³⁸

Consequently (albeit a decade after his meeting with Mandela) Doran was inspired to stage a production set in East Africa with an all-black cast of British actors. While he was researching African politics to see if the play would 'fit' and have resonance, the Arab Spring was underway:

The big question in Libya was not, 'Are they going to get rid of Colonel Gaddafi? Will they assassinate Colonel Gaddafi?' because that seemed inevitable. The big question was, 'What happens next?' And that's the big question in *Julius Caesar*. Really what Brutus and Cassius do by assassinating Caesar, is open up a vacuum into which much more ruthless people run. It's an amazingly contemporary, resonant, politically astute play.³⁹

Doran sets his play in East Africa (he felt that their more 'precise' accents worked better with Shakespeare's language than the more 'musical' West African accent). This choice could be problematic, as it is a rather stereotyped view on African accents and on which

³⁷ Kunene and the King: 'Programme Exclusive. Interview with John Kani'. Royal Shakespeare Company, 2019 <https://www.rsc.org.uk/support/supporters-room/get-closer/kunene-and-the-king-programme-exclusive>.

³⁸ Brown, E. 'Shakespeare's African Play'. *Interview Magazine*, 12 April 2013. <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/gregory-doran-julius-caesar-bam>.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

accents would favour Shakespeare's texts; it is actually a departure from the RSC's policy on accents, whereby any accent is suitable for performing Shakespeare.

Doran's Caesar (a Wellesian touch) was not a specific dictator but appeared to be a mix of Idi Amin, Jean-Bédél Bokassa and Robert Mugabe. Caesar was costumed in a white suit, with much ostentatious, gold jewellery and a fly whisk that he would constantly wave around.

The play received favourable reviews on the whole and later went on a world tour – with Michael Billington of *The Guardian* describing it as giving 'the play's central debate about the necessary political murder a new immediacy'.⁴⁰ In keeping with the responses to Hashie's production, discussed earlier, much political discussion was engendered among readers in this forum. Claire Joanne Huxham described the production as 'bold and illuminating', noting that '*Julius Caesar* is all about power: who's got it, who wants it, who needs it.' She was particularly impressed by the casting and the artistic vision of centring the play in East Africa.⁴¹ Doran also mentions that when the play went on tour to Moscow, 'the audience stood up and cheered'.⁴² He remarked on the connection with Putin, which most likely prompted this response.

A much less conventional production, this time set in a South African context, was *The Julius Caesar Project*, a fourth-year student production at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2013 facilitated by Sarah Roberts. This was a collaborative work, where the students collectively decided on the interpretation of the text. De Waal adds:

The Julius Caesar Project thus positioned the actors, working in ensemble, as the primary agents of interpretation. Yamikani Mahaka-Phiri, one of the ten student actors who participated in the production, describes the play as an exercise in actor agency, with a main objective being to "create a performance 'owned' by the performers, as an ensemble or collective, rather than the director".⁴³

⁴⁰ Billington, Michael. 'Julius Caesar – Review'. *The Guardian*, 7 June 2012.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jun/07/julius-caesar-review>.

⁴¹ Huxham, CJ. 'An African Tragedy: *Julius Caesar* at The RSC Review'. *Hollywood News.com*, 2012.

<https://www.thehollywoodnews.com/2012/07/07/an-african-tragedy-julius-caesar-at-the-rsc-2012-review/>.

⁴² Brown, E. *Interview Magazine*, 12 April 2013.

⁴³ Mahaka-Phiri, Y. 'Towards developing ensemble training', in De Waal, M. (2020): 2.

There were nine actors working on the project and they played multiple roles. The text was divided into three main parts, fragmenting the linear progression of Shakespeare's text. The actors would collaborate with each other on the content of these three parts, incorporating their shared experience of protest in South Africa – each of the three parts would focus on the citizens (a very Brechtian approach) but told from the perspective of a different character. The play aimed to “create a performance ‘owned’ by the performers, as an ensemble or collective, rather than the director”.⁴⁴

The cast was also multi-racial and multilingual. However, there were certain considerations that the ensemble had to bear in mind, as Mahaka-Phiri points out:

For example, the group had a distinct awareness of shifting character dynamics according to racial representation. During one performance, Mahaka-Phiri remembers, ‘Cinna [played by a white actor] was killed by four girls, four black girls’; to the group, it ‘didn’t look right, and we couldn’t ignore that’. This incident points to the multiple potential tensions that this mode of performance spontaneously generates.⁴⁵

The actors translated aspects of the text into the languages which they spoke as their primary language, interspersing their translations with Shakespeare's original text. This was also a collaborative effort and a further way of the students ‘owning’ the production.

Megan Godsell's review of the production describes it as how ‘Shakespeare SHOULD be done’:

I think no writer, starting now to describe Marikana, to tell the story of one man dragged behind a police van, of one mob raising up their hands to cry Liberty over dead bodies could tell a story that better captures the darkness our nation and world are facing now.⁴⁶

This project proved (as highlighted by Godsell's review) that *Julius Caesar* really tapped into the events of the time, for example, Roberts' weaving of Marikana into the production.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Godsell, Megan. ‘The *Julius Caesar* Project’. Fiftyfivethumbs, 16 May 2013.
<https://fiftyfivethumbss.wordpress.com/2013/05/16/the-julius-caesar-project/>.

Although productions of *Antony and Cleopatra* usually focus on the two lovers and to a much lesser extent the political themes, there have been a number of productions which demonstrate an awareness of the politics of the play. Simonov's 1971 production of Boris Pasternak's translation of the play, at the Vaktanov Theatre in Moscow, was one. Another was the Bankside Globe's production of 1973 that emphasised 'geopolitical games'.⁴⁷

One of the few recent productions in which the political themes have been made prominent is the South African National Children's Theatre experimental interpretation of *Antony and Cleopatra*. This production was informed by the ongoing #FeesMustFall movement, which in turn gave rise to the increased push for 'decolonisation' (hence, also, *DCoriolanus*).

Shakespeare is traditionally symbolic of colonial discourse and has been entrenched in the school curriculum (for both IEB and DBE) for decades. The IEB is the examination board overseeing the assessment of independent school matriculants. Unfortunately, the inequalities of the past continue into the present and as a result independent schools still consist of mostly white learners, as the fees are generally much higher than those of government schools and IEB schools are mostly situated in previously 'white' areas, making them inaccessible to many black learners. In government schools, in the last few years, Shakespeare has been given less prominence in the curriculum, in that schools now have a choice between Shakespeare and other works, although the other options can also be rather Euro-centric. However, in independent schools, he still has a very dominant position in the curriculum.

It was against this background that Néka Da Costa, the director of the National Children's Theatre's *Antony and Cleopatra*, had to navigate the staging of a Shakespeare play for an audience of learners from IEB schools. She elaborates further on the debate in this respect:

In the debate over the inclusion or exclusion of Shakespeare when it comes to tertiary and secondary English curricula, those arguing against including Shakespeare maintain that no matter how intricate his writing is and how universal his themes are claimed to be, the choice to make Shakespeare a literary pillar of the study of English in South Africa is a dangerous move that embodies everything that the 2015-16 student protests were rejecting: the valorisation of a white, male playwright using early modern English as the

⁴⁷ Shakespeare, W. *Antony and Cleopatra*. eds, Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen. (London: Macmillan: RSC Edition, 2009): 162. (Introduction).

standard by which all writing and theatre should be measured is counter-productive both to decolonisation as decentralising European knowledges and to the Africanisation of knowledge.⁴⁸

Da Costa was severely constricted in this endeavour, as she had to keep the original text and setting. The only changes could be cuts. The learners were faced with an essay examination where they had to be familiar with the themes, character and plot. Therefore, Da Costa was unable to follow her first instincts (which would be a type of decolonisation) of modernising the language, incorporating local languages and locales. She states that ‘these strategies are among the approaches to working with Shakespeare employed in South Africa since 1994.’⁴⁹

So long as the essay remains the chosen form of assessment, schools are unable to adopt the strategies outlined by Da Costa. Learners have to study the entire original text and their examination assessment is academic and literary. Educators would therefore take learners to see a ‘traditional’ performance rather than an experimental one. Accordingly, Da Costa had to work around this in the staging of the play. The emphasis had to be on the visual, to help learners overcome their difficulties with the language. To accommodate the African philosophy of ‘ubuntu’, Da Costa moved away from the ‘top-down approach’, with the director as the authority on artistic decisions, and democratised the process of staging the play. It became a collaborative effort, with actors giving their input, as in the *Julius Caesar Project* and *DCoriolanus*.

One of the first visual concepts of the play that Da Costa considered was the idea of tableaux. She refers to Bonnie Marranca on the effectiveness of a tableau to communicate meaning:

‘The stillness of tableau sequences suspends time, causing the eye to focus on an image, and slows down the process of input. This increases the critical activity of the mind ... It also regulates the dialectical interplay of word and image.’⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Da Costa, N. ‘Positionality and Performance: Staging Antony and Cleopatra for South African schools in the context of decolonisation imperatives.’ *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, Volume 33 (2020): 7.

<https://www.ajol.info/index.php/sisa/article/view/201831>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Marranca, Bonnie. *Theatre Writings*. New York: Paj Publications (1981) in Da Costa, N. (2020): 81.

A major consideration in the creation of tableaux, was the delineation between Egypt and Rome. This was done with the use of patterned carpets, blocks, poles and cushions. For example, the poles could be used to create an idea of ships, bringing to life the battle of Actium. The tableau concept would also aid characterisation and relationships between characters.

The ensemble introduced African vernacular expressions and story-telling conventions to localise the narrative. The soothsayer was transformed into a traditional healer and various traditional songs were also added, including isiZulu funeral songs. Da Costa chose mostly black actors to bring a 'contemporary relevance and a local energy'⁵¹ She also felt that '[T]he students themselves need to see actors who look like them – in *Africa*'.⁵²

Ben Kgosimore, the actor who plays Antony, in another interview with Shakespeare ZA, adds: In terms of accessibility, in South Africa, in 2018, we are performing a Shakespeare text where we have a black Antony, a black Cleopatra, and a predominantly black cast... I just think that it shows the kids that we are going to perform to that there are multiple ways you can look at the play, and at Shakespeare, and that you can also put yourself in the shoes of this particular character.⁵³

The casting of Cleopatra has become a contentious Issue in the twenty first century. Da Costa mentions the many white actresses who have portrayed her over the years, making particular mention of Elizabeth Taylor.⁵⁴ However, it may be problematic to replace one inaccuracy with another. It must be remembered that Cleopatra was from the house of Ptolemy and they were the original colonisers of Egypt. Even though Cleopatra was born in Egypt and adopted Egyptian customs, the royal family had a policy of 'keeping it in the family', wanting to keep their bloodline 'pure'. It was common practice for brothers and sisters to marry (among the Ptolemies) and Cleopatra's parents were apparently brother and sister. Most evidence points towards the fact that no Ptolemy would have married outside the family, however some sources have indicated that her mother may have come

⁵¹ Da Costa (2020).

⁵² Kirsten Dey, 'The Interview Series #7 (Part 1),' in De Waal (2020).

⁵³ Kirsten Dey, 'The Interview Series #7 (Part 2): Shakespeare ZA meets with the cast and director of the National Children's Theatre's production of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra', *Shakespeare ZA*, 4 April 2018.

<http://shakespeare.org.za/blog/2018/4/4/the-interview-series-7-part-2-shakespeare-za-meets-with-the-cast-and-director-of-the-national-childrens-theatres-production-of-shakespeares-antony-and-cleopatra?rq=Antony>.

in De Waal, M. (2020).

⁵⁴ Da Costa, N. (2020).

from the Egyptian priestly class. The Ptolemies originate from Macedonia (which in the time of Alexander the Great, stretched across most of present-day central Asia towards India) so Shakespeare is probably the most accurate when he refers to her as a 'gipsy' (originally from India) and having a 'tawny front' in Act I, scene i. Cleopatra would most likely have looked Middle Eastern or mixed race, rather than 'black' African – the Ptolemies intermarried with the Seleucids before they colonised Egypt, so it is highly unlikely that she would look like Elizabeth Taylor, Judi Dench or any other Northern European actresses who have played her. The historian Michael Grant leans more toward Macedonian Greek:

It was a world controlled by the Romans, but the inhabitants of its eastern and richer half were mainly Greeks, or people who belonged to some more easterly race but spoke Greek as their first language. Cleopatra, too, was a Greek much more than anything else. Though queen of Egypt, she possessed not a drop of Egyptian blood in her veins. The last ruler of the dynasty of the Ptolemies, she was of wholly Greek upbringing and to a very considerable extent of Greek race.⁵⁵

However, Grant may not be correct about her not having a 'drop of Egyptian blood' as so little is known about her mother's parentage.

When casting Cleopatra for a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* such as Da Costa's, the focus is not on such historical speculation but on reflecting the diversity of the audience and upholding inclusivity. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a work of fiction after all, and casting choices are a matter of the director's discretion.

It would nevertheless be an interesting historical exercise to explore the different historical sources and hear the different 'voices', even though this topic has now been appropriated by acrimonious race politics. There is much conflicting and inconclusive evidence, since so little is known about Cleopatra's maternal parentage. Perhaps directors need to acknowledge that a case can be made for a Middle Eastern actress or a black actress. There needs to be room for debate, which may lead to a compromise between those who see Cleopatra as 'white' owing to her Greek ancestry, those who feel that she is 'mixed race' because of her mother possibly being Egyptian, and those who see her as African, since Egypt is an African country.

⁵⁵ Grant, Michael. *Cleopatra*. (London: Phoenix, 2000): xv.

Yet this controversy shows no sign of abating: consider the outcry about Patti Jenkins' decision to cast the Israeli actress Gal Gadot (who she directed in *Wonder Woman*), in a forthcoming Cleopatra biopic.⁵⁶

Regarding reception of the NCT production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Da Costa indicates further that they received audience feedback from the question-and-answer sessions that followed each performance, as in the NCT *Coriolanus* two years before. Most learners responded well to each performance and I can attest to that as I took my own learners to see both of these productions. They felt that the visual aspects informed by the tableau effect in *Antony and Cleopatra* especially added to their understanding of the play.

Titus Andronicus was popular among Elizabethan audiences but has been less so since then – possibly because Elizabethan audiences had more of a stomach for violence than those that followed them. The two performances that I will focus on in this chapter are Julie Taymor's 1999 film production, *Titus*, and Doran's 1995 South African stage production, *Titus Andronicus*. Taymor's critically acclaimed film failed at the box office and Doran's stage production closed after seven weeks of half-full houses.

Taymor's film is highly creative and examines Shakespeare's political and psychological themes with penetrating depth. If Fiennes' Rome could be anywhere and everywhere, Taymor's Rome is more specific, with the coliseum and Mussolini's government building which was inspired by the coliseum as focal points. The original Roman Colosseum was too ruined for filming, so Taymor shot many of the scenes in Pula, Croatia, which has an intact coliseum, the only one 'still in good shape' and 'the archetypal theatre of cruelty.' Ironically, just after the scenes were shot there, the Kosovo war broke out.⁵⁷ The film also invokes America as much as it does Rome. The opening scenes are set in a twentieth-century kitchen which seems very American in its aesthetic. Taymor also uses a 1950s-model American car (the same model car in which JFK took his last ride) which transports Bassianus to Mussolini's government building.⁵⁸ There could be overtones of the Cold War

⁵⁶ Flint, H. 'Gal Gadot as Cleopatra is a backwards step for Hollywood representation'. *The Guardian*. 14 Oct. 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/oct/14/gal-gadot-cleopatra-backwards-step-for-hollywood-representation>.

⁵⁷ Taymor's DVD commentary in Flaherty, J. 'Filming Shakespeare's Rome: The "Preposterous Contemporary" Eternal City.' *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Volume 17, No. 2, Special Issue: The 'Preposterous Contemporary Jacobean': Adaptations in Film and Theater, Responses to Pascale Aebischer, Penn State University Press (2015): 232. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/intelitestud.17.2.0228>.

⁵⁸ Imdb.com. *Titus Trivia*. (1999). <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120866/trivia>.

here – with Bassianus, representing democracy, at loggerheads with tyranny (Saturninus). Antony Hopkins, as Titus, also draws on his Hannibal Lecter persona (from his role in *Silence of the Lambs*) to emphasise Titus's bloodlust.

The opening and closing scenes, foregrounding the coliseum, frame the violence contained within the film, illustrating how deeply embedded violence is in Roman society. Taymor also makes use of Mussolini's government building that was built to embody the greatness of the ancient Roman Empire. Drawing on ancient Rome as well as Mussolini's Fascist Rome, Taymor underscores the temporal universality of her film with the opening march-past of ancient Roman soldiers wearing breast plates and goose-stepping Fascist soldiers, combined with a motley procession of chariots, horses, tanks and armoured cars. She refers to this combination of eras as 'blended time',⁵⁹ her point being that the themes illustrated in the film are timeless ones. She wanted to depict 2000 years of war and violence by mixing props and costumes of different eras.

The fascist theme comes to the forefront in the way she portrays the succession crisis at the beginning of the film. Saturninus's sinister-looking black car, with a figurine of a monstrous, snarling lion, was based on that of Mussolini. He is dressed in black and red, the colours of fascism of the 1930s, with the government building (known disparagingly in Rome as the 'Square Coliseum')⁶⁰ prominently displayed during his speeches. Taymor exaggerates his megalomania, with his simpering posturing. Bassianus, by contrast, is dressed in plain black, arriving in the 1950s white car described earlier. He is earnest in his plea to the people. Taymor makes this 'election' a public one, with the followers of each violently assaulting each other, depicting 'the people' who follow populists, as an aggressive mob. The Caesar who was Saturninus' and Bassianus' father has just died. The audience is made aware of this by means of newspaper headlines and giant-sized posters of the late ruler. Taymor emphasises that governance of Rome was dictatorial, evidenced by the cult-of-personality-evoking posters. However, there is an element of democracy in that the leader is chosen – this is seen in the 'campaigns' of Bassianus and Saturninus. This democracy soon disappears when the patricians represented by Titus choose the new emperor and Rome descends into totalitarianism. There are overtones of the German Nazi 'plebiscite' and the Italian Fascist march on Rome – Hitler and Mussolini both destroyed the democratic systems in their countries, from within. In Taymor's film, democracy doesn't re-

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

surface until the end, where Lucius is depicted as a populist leader, being described as a man of the people. In Shakespeare's original text, his final vengeful words hint at a return to tyranny. Taymor's film ends on a more hopeful note, the boy carrying Aaron's baby possibly being key to a return to democracy.

Taymor almost caricatures Saturninus – in this way, showing just how wrong Titus's endorsing of Saturninus is. Titus's costuming is also indicative of his rigid adherence to tradition, in this case the tradition of primogeniture. In the opening scenes, we see him wearing traditional Roman soldier's dress. He rejects change in the form of Bassianus, who wants to introduce a more democratic form of governance. Taymor makes it clear to the audience that Bassianus would be the more successful leader.

Later in the film, when Saturninus is under threat from Lucius and his Goth allies, his posturing wilts. He becomes petulant and child-like in his realisation that Lucius has the support of the people, while he does not. Both Shakespeare and Taymor emphasise the importance of a leader having popular support (even a dictator like Saturninus realises this).

Taymor further examines the operation of power through the character of Tamora (played by Jessica Lange). She is initially a prisoner. Although Queen of the Goths, she has been captured and all of the trappings of power have been stripped away. Her costume is rough, her hair is unkempt and her face is devoid of make-up. She pleads with Titus for mercy, in an outburst of raw emotion, appealing to his humanity, but his adherence to tradition (the custom of repaying a loss of life with an enemy sacrifice) prevents him from doing so. In her depiction of Tamora at this point, Taymor invokes our sympathy. Tamora's cry of 'O cruel, irreligious piety!' (I.i.130) underscores this. She rightly points out Titus's arch hypocrisy. Tamora appeals to Titus's compassion with her mention of 'mother's tears (I.i.106)'. She also reminds him of their common humanity in the lines 'But must my sons be slaughtered in the streets for valiant doings in their country's cause?' (I.i.112) – which his sons have done too. His sense of piety and nobility is also appealed to in her request for him to 'not stain thy tomb with blood'.

When she becomes empress, the change is dramatic and immediate. Her demeanour is regal and haughty. Tamora's costuming by Milena Canonero reflects this change. She is dressed in gold and silver, with metallic coloured make up, as befitting her newly acquired royal status and matching her husband's flamboyant dress. Her vulnerability is gone and in

its place is the hardness and rage that have resulted from Titus's murder of her eldest son. Taymor shows us the deepest recesses of her psyche in the first of a series of surrealistic visions (an interpolation by Taymor that goes beyond Shakespeare's text). Taymor calls these Penny Arcade Nightmares:

The otherworldly nature of the PANs enables them to serve as periodic signposts to the film's engagement with violence. They often simultaneously provide and temper images of violence, offering the violence that is a part of this play, human history, and popular culture and transposing it to a realm that is not part of this world.⁶¹

In this first Penny Arcade Nightmare, Taymor depicts Tamora and Titus facing each other off amidst a sea of flames and floating torsos (a reference to her son and her thoughts of revenge).

In her depiction of violence, Taymor also makes reference to the Holocaust. Richard Burt elaborates on this:

Taymor's attempt to critique violence via Fascism and the Holocaust were inevitably in tension with her reinscription of the horror genre. The consequence for Taymor, in my view, is not that she compromises her critique of extreme violence represented by events such as the Holocaust and unwittingly produces a horror film. The consequence is rather that in toning down the violence and making it a generational issue, Taymor subverts her own critique of Fascism and her redemption of the play as a work of art rather than trash by reinscribing a Fascist aesthetic⁶²

Taymor's executive producer, Steve Bannon would have been pleased with the reinscription of a Fascist aesthetic. It would appeal to his right-wing sensibilities and his love of violence. However, the film's ending would not have impressed him as it is a clear rejection of tyranny, violence and revenge. As producer, his measure of the success of the film was whether or not it made money and was a 'hit'. He said that if Taymor had done it his way it would not have been a flop. The film was not a box office success, but it has been

⁶¹ Bardfilm.blogspot. 'The Penny Arcade Nightmare'. (27 July 2016). <http://bardfilm.blogspot.com/2016/07/the-penny-arcade-nightmare-courtesy.html>.

⁶² Burt, Richard. 'Shakespeare and the Holocaust: Julie Taymor's Titus is Beautiful, or Shakesploi Meets (the) Camp'. *Colby Quarterly*. Volume 37, issue no.1 (March 2001): 92. <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3323&context=cq&httpsredir=1&referer=>.

critically acclaimed on its artistic merits. Taymor herself has added, when faced with the accusation that the violence in her film is 'over-the-top':

When hate is embedded in people, which is what happens in that scene in the mausoleum [when the victorious Andronici demand a sacrifice of the defeated Goths, the death of Tamora's eldest son, Alarbus], an outsider – whether it's Hitler or Aaron – can harness that hate and turn it into violence. I want people to see that if you instil hatred and racism into any person - whether it's the average German in Germany ... I keep using the Holocaust because it's the biggest event of our century – it can be twisted and manipulated. People in groups can justify their actions.⁶³

Tamora, especially, is a character who has been given cause to hate. Titus and his family make many disparaging remarks about the Goths (even Lavinia who sneeringly insults Tamora and Aaron) yet Titus is no better, despite seeing his own nation, the Romans, as morally superior. He commits an equally grotesque set of crimes, even killing two of his own children.

Taymor updates the philosophy of 'virtus', which Shakespeare critiques, through the character of Titus most particularly, illustrating how it has stripped him of his humanity. This is shown at the beginning of the film, especially with Titus's killing of Alarbus and Mutius. She extends this concept of 'virtus' to a society that is embedded in violence. Rome's success is based on its prowess in war. However, this societal foundation of violence extends beyond Rome. She illustrates this idea in the very first opening scenes of the 'modern' child playing with his soldiers (also a mix of Roman gladiators and others including space warriors). Young boys play with soldiers to practise for their future warrior careers or a future of aggression. The young boy is then transported to the coliseum, the very seat of gladiatorial combat.

Shakespeare's ending is bleak, with a succession of power almost bookending the play. Lucius assumes power after the death of Saturninus, without even needing the assistance of the Goth army. Although he is known to be honourable ('gracious governor' [V.iii.146]) and well-loved of the people ('The common voice do cry it shall be so' [V.iii.140]) he continues with the cycle of violence and revenge, with his brutal sentence and death rite

⁶³ De Luca, Maria and Rindroth, Mary. 'Mayhem, Madness, Method: An Interview with Julie Taymor'. *Cinéaste*. Volume 23, no. 3 (2000): 31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41689259>.

pronounced on Aaron and Tamora respectively. Taymor includes these vengeful words of Marcus and Lucius but she goes beyond Shakespeare in adding a hopeful note, although she indicates that this hope is fragile in the exaggeratedly faux sunrise that young Lucius walks into, carrying Aaron's baby.

Taymor has stated that she was unaware of Bannon's role as executive producer until she saw his name on the poster.⁶⁴ This would imply that he had no creative input in the making of the film. Bannon has his own 'take' on *Titus Andronicus*, which includes a screenplay, again co-written by Bannon and Jones, titled *Andronicus* and set in space: 'The war between the Romans and the Goths becomes a war between the Andronici, beings of light and goodness, and beings of darkness and evil called the 'Shades'.'⁶⁵ In this adaptation, Tamora becomes the 'space queen' and Aaron a 'lower human'. The racist overtones of this screenplay, as in Bannon's *Coriolanus*, are troubling. In this way Bannon's Shakespeare adaptations shed much light on his politics. His sense of himself as a victim (from being snubbed by Hollywood to being fired by Trump and then rejected even by Breitbart, culminating in his arrest on fraud charges) possibly means that a revenge play of the bloodiest proportions would have great resonance for him. Former colleagues mention his affinity for violence, borne out by the dubbing of his Washington office as the 'war room'. He also vowed to 'deconstruct Washington administration structures',⁶⁶ a manifestation of his grievance politics: 'I want to bring everything crashing down, and destroy all of today's establishment.'⁶⁷ However, he has clearly missed Shakespeare's ultimate condemnation of revenge and othering. Through the character of Titus, Shakespeare shows the speciousness of the Roman belief in their superiority over the Goths, with Titus committing crimes as terrible as those perpetrated by Tamora, Aaron and her sons. The fact that the play ends with Lucius's vindictive words against Tamora and Aaron illustrates that revenge is a never-ending cycle. This has been lost on Steve Bannon.

According to Zarum, 'Bannon was (presumably is) an admirer of the Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl. 'Her playbook was key for him,' says Jones. 'I think he used her technique of fear.'⁶⁸ Bannon has a long history of involvement in conservative propaganda. He was

⁶⁴ Zarum, L.ara. 'Steve Bannon's Adventures in La-La Land'. *Flavorwire.com*. (25 April 2017). <https://www.flavorwire.com/604233/steve-bannons-adventures-in-la-la-land>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Lødemel Tvedt, I. 'The Lamentable Tragedy of Stephen K. Bannon'. *Guernica*. (May 2015). <https://www.guernicamag.com/the-lamentable-tragedy-of-stephen-k-bannon/>.

⁶⁸ Zarum, L. (25 April 2017).

chairman of Breitbart and produced various films for conservative organisations – notably a biopic of Ronald Reagan – seeing himself as a kind of ‘Leni Riefenstahl of the Tea Party’.⁶⁹ He also has connections with conservative factions of the Catholic Church in the Vatican, trying to spread the ideas of ‘The Movement’ (his populist ideal) into Europe. His anti-immigrant, racist views underlie all of these endeavours and enabled Donald Trump’s rise to power. The conservative propaganda machine has now taken on a life of its own and risen to gigantic proportions, with a proliferation of far-right news outlets such as Newsmax and One America News – in addition to Fox News and Breitbart. All of this culminated in the ‘Big Lie’, ‘Stop the Steal’ (the false claims that Trump actually won the November 2020 election) and ultimately the insurrection of January 6th, 2021. These baseless assertions have been repeated so assiduously that 52% of Republicans, as reported in a Nov 2020 Reuters poll, believe that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president.

I conclude this chapter with a discussion of two South African versions of *Titus Andronicus*: Antony Sher and Gregory Doran’s 1995 Market Theatre production and Dieter Reible’s 1970 production staged at Cape Town’s Hofmeyr Theatre. Doran and Sher’s controversial production only had a seven-week run in South Africa, performing to very sparse audiences, while Reible’s production ran for four weeks in Cape Town playing to full houses. However, Doran’s production did have a successful run in England and Spain. I will return to the reasons for these contrasting audience reactions below.

Neither director was South African: Doran was steeped in the background of the Royal Shakespeare Company, while Reible originated from Germany and was considered one of that country’s top directors at the time. Their ‘foreignness’ had a major impact on their respective visions for their productions. With Reible, it was more of an advantage, but for Doran, it meant huge gaps of knowledge of the socio-political characteristics of South Africa. In Doran’s case especially, his outsider status – combined with the ‘insider-outsider’ status of Antony Sher as an expatriate South African returning to perform in the country of his birth after decades as a ‘British’ actor – played a significant role in the way audiences responded to his artistic decisions.

⁶⁹ Weiner, Rex. ‘Titus in Space’. *The Paris Review*, 29 November 2016.
<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/11/29/titus-in-space/>

Both Reible and Doran intended to confront South Africa's violent past (and present), with the themes of violence, race (or nationality) and revenge in *Titus Andronicus* being the ideal vehicles for doing so. Rowan Quince quotes this statement by Reible indicating his intentions:

South Africa is a very violent society, but the violence is removed from the people in their nice houses. If there was a message, it was to confront white audiences, who are part of the very violent society, with a production which exposes the violence. I thought it would be interesting for South African audiences: a black man gets involved in a love story with a white princess and they have a coloured kid. Of course, its brothers get terribly upset and try to kill the little 'bastard.' I thought this would be a good story for South Africans.⁷⁰

Reible underpinned his intentions of confronting white society in South Africa with 'the brutality inherent in the apartheid system'⁷¹ by having Shakespeare's play translated into Afrikaans. Reible was brought to South Africa by Pieter Fourie who headed CAPAB (Cape Performing Arts) at the time. Breyten Breytenbach (both an eminent Afrikaner poet and an anti-apartheid activist) was chosen as the translator. It is not certain as to whether this was a political decision (considering Breytenbach's status as the *bête noire* of the apartheid government) or a more personal one, as Breytenbach was a friend of Fourie.⁷² Benjamin Green, one of the few scholars to conduct a study of this translation, elaborates on its ultimate effect:

Beyond the level of mere literature, however, we may also see that this translation served as a contribution to the anti-Apartheid movement, a contribution that may have been minor but which nevertheless helped to question the legitimacy, the premises and the prevalence of a vexed and ultimately doomed system of laws and government.⁷³

Translating the play into Afrikaans meant a direct challenge to Afrikaans audiences. Reible hoped for self-examination and reckoning as a result of audiences being addressed directly

⁷⁰ Quince, Rohan. *Shakespeare in South Africa: Stage Productions during the Apartheid Era*. (Peter Lang Publishing, 2000) in Whitaker, E. E, 'Shakespeare in South Africa: An Examination of Two Performances of *Titus Andronicus* in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid South Africa'. (Master's Thesis. University of Tennessee, 2017): 45. https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/4911.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Green, Benjamin. *A skopos-based analysis of Breytenbach's Titus Andronicus*. (MPhil thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2005):155. <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/20107>.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

in their own language 'to make clear to the Afrikaners that this violence was *theirs* – it was a production meant for them in their culture and context.'⁷⁴ A week before the performance was to begin, there were acrimonious letters in the Afrikaans press, slating the choice of Breytenbach as translator.⁷⁵ Tellingly, his name was not mentioned in subsequent advertisements for the performance. However, it was still mentioned in the theatre programme.

Surprisingly, the play (or translation) was not banned. The Afrikaner authorities saw the translation as being part of their drive to elevate the Afrikaans language. Many Shakespeare plays had been translated into Afrikaans since 1945, as the Nationalist government felt that Shakespeare's prestige would lend cachet to the development of their own language. Therefore, Shakespeare transcended banning or censorship. Those aspects would be trained on the actual performance, rather than the translation, which was true to the original text.

The producers of the play invited to the dress rehearsal a member of the censorship board, Professor H. van der Merwe Scholtz, who was also chairman of CAPAB's drama committee. They were worried that the play would be banned, so they preferred to gain advice regarding which scenes to cut in order to circumvent banning. Professor Scholtz took exception to the interracial love scenes between Tamora and Aaron, but was completely unconcerned about the rape of Lavinia and the excessive violence of the play.⁷⁶ This is quite a telling indictment of the apartheid authorities: that love between races was anathema, yet brutal gang rape and other extreme violence were perfectly acceptable. It also shows how deeply embedded and normalised violence was in white society, exactly what the production attempted to stress.

Reible dressed his actors in modern dress but only white actors were allowed to perform (according to apartheid laws) so Aaron was played by a white actor in blackface. This did not impede the reaction of the black audience (consisting mostly of support staff and their families who were given special permission to watch one preview performance – especially organised by the producers). This particular audience reacted very emotionally when Aaron delivered these lines:

⁷⁴ Whitaker, E. (2017): 49.

⁷⁵ Green, B. (2005): 156.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Aron: En nou na die Gote, so vlug soos die swaeltjie vlieg,
 Om die skat in my arms daar weg to steek
 En in die geheim die keiserin se vriende te ontmoet.
 Komaan, jou dikbek slaaf, ek sal jou soontoe neem
 Want dis jy wat die vlieg is in die salf;
 Ek sal jou bessies en wortels laat eet;
 Jy sal van dikmelk leef, en die bok se spene suig,
 En tuisgaan in 'n grot, e nek sal you grootmaak
 Om 'n vegter te wees, bevelhebber oor 'n soldatekamp.
 Af.

(IV. ii.172 – 180)⁷⁷

The original text follows:

Now to the Goths, as swift as swallow flies,
 There to dispose this treasure in mine arms,
 And secretly to greet the Empress' friends.
 Come on, you thick-lipp'd slave, I'll bear you hence,
 For it is you that puts us to our shifts.
 I'll make you feed on berries and on roots,
 And feed on curds and whey, and suck the goat,
 And cabin in a cave, and bring you up
 To be a warrior and command a camp.

Exit (IV. ii.172 – 180)

The aforementioned lines, as well as Aaron's rhetorical question, 'is black so base a hue?' (line 71) and his affirmation that 'Coal-black is better than another hue/In that it scorns to bear another hue,/ For all the water in the ocean/Can never turn the swan's black legs to white' (lines 99 to 102) are sometimes referred to as Aaron's 'black power' speeches.⁷⁸ The black audience certainly interpreted them as such and are reported to have run to the stage, with women holding up their babies. For them the speech was emblematic of their own struggle for equality.

⁷⁷ Shakespeare, W. *Titus Andronicus*, trans. Breytenbach, B. (Cape Town: Buren, 1970).

⁷⁸ Green, B. (2005): 174-175.

White audiences reacted very differently. The excessive violence (40 litres of fake blood had been ordered for the run), firstly, caused many audience-member visits to the bathroom:

The Guardian reports that 'one young man in the audience fainted' and '[a]nother rushed out clutching his stomach' ('Bard Shocks Cape Town' 417). The review also claims that South Africa's board of censors was 'displeased with the play's sensualism and the birth of a devil child from a union between a blond queen and a black moor, who later exults in his blackness'.⁷⁹

Unfortunately, this audience had identified Aaron as the Other and it became easy for them to see the violence as attributed to him:

As one might expect, then, violence in Afrikaans Shakespeare productions was never interpreted by the Afrikaner establishment as interrogating the apartheid system, the great perpetrator of institutionalized violence in the country. Instead Afrikaners perceived the clear relevance to other societies, especially those in Black Africa, confirming their belief that violence is the inevitable concomitant [sic] of primitive blood.⁸⁰

Thus, although the production performed to full houses for most of its run, ultimately, in terms of Reible's intentions, it was not a success: white South African audiences failed to acknowledge their own role in the violence of South Africa. These audiences had misinterpreted the play, reinforcing their own beliefs concerning race. This is perhaps why the production was so popular with audiences of the time.

The reviews in the press were mixed. The Afrikaner press was more negative than the English-speaking press. The race Issue and the ideas surrounding violence were shied away from in most of the reviews. This avoidance is most likely connected with apartheid

⁷⁹ Kolin, Philip. 'Bard Shocks Cape Town.' *The Guardian*, 28 Sept., 1970. Reprinted as 'Titus Andronicus in South Africa, 1970: Bard Shocks Cape Town.' *Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip C. Kolin, (Garland Publishing, 1995): 417-18 in Whitaker, E.E. (2017): 44. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315724911-37/titus-andronicus-south-africa-1970-philip-kolin>.

⁸⁰ Quince (2000). in Whitaker, E.E. (2017): 47.

restrictions on media practice: newspaper journalists faced censorship at best and at worst being targeted by the security police.

One of the most candid reviews came from Terry Herbst of the *Cape Times*:

But what Reible brings home, through his approach and through Breytenbach's undoubtedly excellent translation, is that man has changed little since those distant days of Roman glory. Some who watch this production will be disgusted. But was it, perhaps, Reible's intention to evoke disgust at an arrogant society that appears to have learnt little about the sensibilities of the less-privileged? *Titus* is certain to be controversial. It probes too sharply into the skin of civilization not to be. As such, it serves an important purpose.⁸¹

After Reible directed an even more controversial *King Lear* (*Koning Lear*) which opened the Nico Malan theatre in Cape Town in 1971, the apartheid government sent him back to Germany. Fourie, with the help of Scholtz (whose assistance here is quite mystifying considering his prominent standing in the apartheid state), brought Reible back to South Africa in 1980. One can only surmise that Reible's expertise impressed Scholtz and his status as a foreigner meant that he would escape the fate of many controversial South African artists.

Reviews for Doran's Market *Titus Andronicus* were almost as mixed as those for Reible's production, with the distinguishing feature of being split between mostly negative reviews in South Africa and almost entirely positive ones in Britain. This had much to do with Doran's (and, to a greater extent, his partner, Antony Sher's) celebrity status in the UK.

Sher collaborated with Doran on this production (much of the artistic direction was of Sher's design). Sher had left South Africa in his late teens, going on to forge a glittering career as a Shakespearean actor in London. He became involved in the anti-apartheid movement during the late 1980s and was a driving force in the Cultural Boycott, the Equity Actors' refusal to allow any of their work to be performed, published or broadcast in South Africa. Sher's abhorrence of apartheid only really made itself felt once he had already left South Africa and he illustrates here how he suppressed his identity:

⁸¹ Herbst, Terry. 'Titus Andronicus Review.' *The Cape Times*, 21 Sept 1970 in Green, B. (2017): 187.

I buried my own South African accent a quarter of a century ago, soon after I arrived in Britain, a naïve 19 year-old. Discovering that this thing called apartheid, just part of normal life back home, was actually a terrible aberration, I became so ashamed of who I was, I resolved to hide my identity.⁸²

When apartheid fell in the early 1990s, Sher decided that he wanted to reconnect with his South African roots. He and Doran proposed to produce a Shakespearean play in South Africa which Doran would direct and in which Sher would star. Their intentions were to stage a play that would be 'relevant' to South Africans and would also serve as a vehicle for Sher's 'homecoming narrative'. 'Relevance' was a hallmark of the Royal Shakespeare Company and this concept became the dominant *raison d'être* for the Sher-Doran *Titus*.

Sher and Doran's respective backgrounds and dramaturgical positions meant that staging a production that was relevant and authentic would be fraught with difficulty. Sher had achieved great success as a Shakespearean actor. He was also a fairly prolific writer, writing mostly autobiographical novels and a very well-known work, *Year of the King* (1986), that became a handbook for aspiring Shakespearean actors. In this work he documents his preparation and acting methods as an RSC actor.⁸³ Doran's only link with South Africa was through Sher and this connection was already tenuous, considering that Sher had spent very little time in the country since his departure in his youth. Thus, the RSC rather than South Africa was the major imaginative and theatrical force behind the production, as argued by John Ball (who also has in mind, here, Janet Suzman's 1987 *Othello*):

Suzman and Sher's approach to Shakespeare in South Africa was *directly* determined by their careers at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Rather than devising their own 'fantasy' about the urgent meaning *Titus* possessed for South Africa, Sher and Doran should be seen as attempting to transplant the theatrical formation [Jonathan] Sinfield calls 'Royal Shakespeare.'⁸⁴

⁸² Ball, John. *Missed Connections: Antony Sher's 'Titus Andronicus' in Johannesburg*. (PhD Dissertation: University of Pittsburgh, 2009): 66.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 60.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 41.

Sher's sense of shame at being South African had now turned to pride. He felt that he no longer had to hide his South African identity and wanted his cast members to feel this way too. He was insistent that the actors speak in their own voices, even going to the lengths of taking the entire cast to London to study voice. Sher explained to the cast (who only associated Shakespeare with Received Pronunciation) that the Elizabethans never spoke the Queen's English, but rather the rough local British dialects. He and Doran worked with Patsy Rodenburg, who felt that RP was simply 'vocal imperialism'.⁸⁵ The irony of this endeavour is that Sher, who was the star of the performance, did not speak in his own authentic voice – which had long since developed into perfect RP. (Many of the white actors playing Afrikaners were English-speaking so their voices were not authentic either.) Sher played the role of Titus whom he depicted as a Eugene Terreblanche figure. By most South African critical accounts, Sher struggled to maintain this accent throughout (it sometimes resembled his Jewish-Afrikaner father's accent, while on other occasions slipped into his now natural British accent).

Sher's depiction of Titus as a Eugene Terreblanche, right-wing stereotype was not well received by critics or audiences. There were many other reasons for the failure of the Market *Titus* but Sher's interpretation of Titus was one of the main ones. Terreblanche was an extreme figure and he was seen as a fringe lunatic. He was viewed by most English-speaking whites as an object of ridicule, a buffoon at best and a bogeyman of the worst excesses of apartheid at worst. There would be no sympathy for a neo-nazi Titus. Selinger and Silverstone concur in Doran's interpretation of Titus:

But there are also deep-seated problems that attend on presenting Titus in this manner: cutting Titus's murder of his son Mutius to insist on a more sympathetic leading man while simultaneously presenting him as a white supremacist is clearly concerning.⁸⁶

Silverstone further notes:

⁸⁵ Ball, JA. (2009): 67.

⁸⁶ Selinger, Megan. 'The Sense of An Ending: The Destabilizing Effect of Performance Closure in Shakespeare's Plays'. *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*, 3797 (2016): 116. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/3797>.

To reproduce, even unwittingly, the image of Terre'Blanche in the context of a play that reifies Titus's grief in terms of heroic suffering implicates the production in racial politics that work against Doran and Sher's project of reconciliation.⁸⁷

(The omission of the killing of Mutius, mentioned above by Selinger, will be discussed below, together with other textual changes undertaken by Doran and Sher.)

Another example of Sher and Doran's disconnect from the socio-political norms of South Africa is their reasoning as to why *Titus Andronicus* is 'South Africa's play.'⁸⁸ There is a subliminal connection to the views of Reible's white South African audiences of 1970, where they saw violence as an African phenomenon. Sher and Doran seemed to have forgotten the rise of Fascism in Europe in the 1930s, the Holocaust, Stalin's purges and the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. Like Reible's audiences, they projected a colonialist, hegemonic point of view, a belief that violence is intrinsic to being African:

Doran repeated the notion of *Titus's* unique relevance to South Africa numerous times, and always returning to a key sentence that he reproduced verbatim on every occasion. *Titus* 'can seem so gratuitous, just a gory melodrama ... but not here somehow.'⁸⁹

In addition to their misreading of sources of violence, Sher and Doran's casting did not take into consideration the fragile and strained labyrinth of race relationships that existed in South Africa in 1995. As well as Titus being depicted as Eugene Terreblanche, the other casting choices also descended into stereotypes. Lavinia speaks in a 'poor white' accent which doesn't sit well with her status of being in the 'first family' of Rome. She elopes with Bassianus, who is depicted as a coloured intellectual. This becomes especially problematic in the scene where she and Bassianus jeer at Tamora for her interracial relationship. Tamora is played by a white actress but her sons are depicted as mixed race 'coloured' gangsters, which dilutes the 'shock value' of Tamora's relationship with Aaron. Bassianus's brother, Saturninus, is played by a white actor, so in this way their rivalry for power is 'raced'.⁹⁰ Distiller supports the view that the racial stereotyping of the casting did not

⁸⁷ Silverstone, Catherine. *Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance*. (New York: Routledge, 2011) in Selinger (2016): 116.

⁸⁸ Doran, Gregory. *Programme Note*. Market Theatre, Johannesburg. March, 1995.

⁸⁹ Sher and Doran. 'Woza! Shakespeare' (2006) in JA Ball (2009): 91.

⁹⁰ Ball, JA. (2009): 105.

account for a 'specific and fraught history of which Sher and Doran seem to be ignorant'.⁹¹ The nurse was also depicted as black. This also becomes problematic especially with the very racist lines that the nurse utters to Aaron as she presents his baby to him. According to Thurman, these lines 'indicted her for being brainwashed into the ideology of the oppressor'.⁹²

Another character change was that of Young Lucius. Instead of being depicted as Titus's grandson, he was portrayed as Titus's young servant and addressed as 'boy', which is a loaded and insulting term that some South African whites use to address black men. This characterisation perpetuated a master-servant relationship, undermining the director's aim of developing a theme of reconciliation. In Shakespeare's text, Titus's grandson plays a key role: in Lavinia's identification of her attackers, in creating sympathy for Titus in mourning his death, and as heir of the Andronici. His compassion hints at a more positive future, as exploited by Taymor in ending her *Titus* on a hopeful note.

In the Market *Titus*, black actors played subservient roles, while white actors/characters held all of the positions of power. Even though Aaron revelled in his blackness and was portrayed sympathetically by Sello Maake ka Ncube, he was also subservient (for example, serving drinks at the hunting party). There was a mix of races amongst the Goths, but they were emphatically portrayed as Other and this played into a black-white binary, reminiscent of apartheid. In a dystopian way, this racial characterisation resulted in the story playing out whites' deepest fears of black revenge.

Doran made other textual and character changes that also had adverse effects. The first of these (as stated earlier) was to cut the killing of Mutius. Sher's reasoning was that the audience would lose sympathy with Titus and that it was a late addition in Shakespeare's original text. In Doran's words 'It's a tricky one ... How do you find a journey for Titus to go, if he's barking mad to start with?'⁹³ However, Shakespeare intended to underscore Titus's rigid adherence to Roman values in comparison with his descent into the madness of grief. The dramatic nature of his downfall is therefore diminished. There is also the other factor of Titus as Eugene Terreblanche. Sympathy for Titus would be lost for this reason alone.

⁹¹ Distiller, N. *Shakespeare and the Coconuts*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012): 78.

<https://doi.org/10.18772/2012065614.6>.

⁹² Thurman, C. 'Sher and Doran's *Titus Andronicus* (1995): Importing Shakespeare, Exporting South Africa'. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. Volume. 18, (2006): 32.

⁹³ Ball, JA. (2009): 118.

The last change was the re-arrangement of speeches. Doran replaced Lucius's vengeful words that conclude the play, with Marcus's more redemptive lines, splicing lines from some of his other speeches into it. The extract below is Marcus's final speech from Shakespeare's original text:

MARCUS ANDRONICUS

You sad-fac'd men, people and sons of Rome
By uproars sever'd, as a flight of fowl
Scatter'd by winds and high tempestuous gusts,
O, let me teach you how to knit again
This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,
These broken limbs again into one body. (V.iii.67)

The aim of this switch of speeches was to create a reconciliatory ending, in keeping with the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa. However, considering the rigid binary of black and white established in the play it came across as an ending that was just tacked on to the closing scenes. It worked well in conjunction with Sher and Doran's thematic vision but was not really a believable ending. Shakespeare's bleak denouement, as a warning that violence and revenge is a never-ending cycle, is far more powerful.

A number of newspaper critics in South Africa wrote fairly scathing reviews of this production, including Digby Ricci of the *Mail and Guardian* (who Sher rather childishly called 'Digby Wigby') as well as Guy Willoughby and Diane De Beer.⁹⁴ Some raised valid points on the bewildering racial stereotypes in the play but unreasonably took issue with the accents presented, reviving an old-fashioned colonial discourse, insisting that Shakespeare should only be performed with Received Pronunciation. Sher, unsurprisingly, took exception to this and told them 'not to be so British'.⁹⁵

Another factor that had not been considered in full by Sher and Doran was the Cultural Boycott mentioned earlier. At the heart of many of these hostile reviews (from white journalists) was a subliminal rage against Sher especially. He was seen as a person who

⁹⁴ Ball, JA. (2009): 86.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

had rejected South Africa, had left his compatriots to suffer apartheid alone and had gone on to a supremely successful career as a Shakespearean actor. He was a 'Johnny-come-lately' in the anti-apartheid movement but was very active in the Cultural Boycott. This boycott was seen as a punishment of liberals, who were opposed to apartheid anyway and yet were left in a cultural desert. For Sher to return as the living embodiment of The Royal Shakespeare Company, imposing his own (British) ideas of South Africa's politics, was the ultimate insult. These sentiments are clearly illustrated in Julius Levin's review:

On May 21, 1995, Julius Levin, writing for *The Sunday Times*, congratulated audiences for 'taking a stand and refusing to be put down by cultural colonisers ... Who does Antony Sher think he is anyway telling us how moribund and terminal South African theatre patrons are? British actors practised their apartheid on us. What makes them believe we can't spurn them in turn?'⁹⁶

Sher had written a number of op-eds in the South African press noting that 'serious theatre is in serious, serious trouble in this city.'⁹⁷ in his reaction to poor audience attendance at almost all of the performances. This led to a heated debate in the media on the state of South African theatre. It is a pity that Sher and Doran did not take heed of some of the valid points made; they reacted defensively and at times petulantly.

The production was largely ignored by black audiences (except for one performance which was bought out by the Anglican Church Society of Soweto). Sher excused this absence with socio-economic reasons: black people lived far away from the theatre and couldn't afford to attend the performance. However, this was not entirely true as the Market would have sell-out performances when Hugh Masekela or other equally popular black musicians played there. Also, by 1995, there was a strong affinity for Afrocentric drama and musicals. Shakespeare, with his colonial baggage, and this time with an Afrikaner slant, would not automatically be a drawcard.

The UK run was far more successful, with sell-out performances for almost every show and the reviews were effusive in their praise. British reviewers based their opinions of the production on their experiences of the play as well as their readings of Sher and Doran's programme notes. The Issues raised in the South African reviews were ignored. British

⁹⁶ Seeff, A. 'Titus Andronicus, South Africa's Shakespeare'. *Borrowers and Lenders*. Volume 4. No 1 (2008): 4.

⁹⁷ Ball, JA. (2009): 204.

audiences had less insight into the intricate workings of race relations in South Africa. Sher and Doran had the added authority of the RSC behind them. Consequently, all felt that the play was an authentic vision of South Africa and South Africans.

The Market *Titus* was partly successful in its attempt to reflect a South African story and make Shakespeare relevant, but unfortunately, Sher's homecoming narrative was not as successful. He was not fêted by South Africans as he had expected to be.

CONCLUSION

Shakespeare presents a number of political ideas and concepts in his English history plays as well as his Roman plays. In order to stimulate contemporary debate and for his work to resonate with his audiences, he extrapolated various ideas on leadership and governance from both his own country's history and that of ancient Rome. In the twenty-first century, we also face crises in democracy and governance. These crises have resulted in increasingly unequal societies and populism has sought to fill the vacuum that the absence of just leadership has created. Populists have used all of the means at their disposal to sway 'the people' to their cause, ostensibly on a quest for justice and fairness, but in reality, populists are only interested in gaining power and maintaining it.

Just as Shakespeare went back into the past to draw parallels sufficiently oblique as to circumvent the censor but vivid enough to make his audiences think, so can we go back to Shakespeare. His representation of power and 'the people' still stimulates political debate today. Although we can't pin down any particular viewpoint attributed to Shakespeare, his dialectical method of presenting varying arguments within the same play adds to the resonance that he has for contemporary audiences and scholars. The reverberating reactions to adaptations and productions of his plays presented around the world attest to Shakespeare's continued influence.

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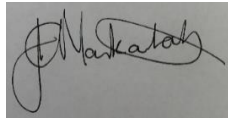
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I hereby declare that all of the work in this dissertation is my own.

Signature of student:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Markantonatos', is shown within a rectangular frame.