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MA DISSERTATION

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

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.