# Tyranny, Insurrection, and the Crowd: *Julius Caesar, Coriolanus* and Appropriations of the Roman past

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Studies that interrogate Shakespeare's role in the construction of early modern national identity typically focus on his history plays. Far less has been done with Shakespeare's appropriation of Roman history. This article argues that the playwright wrote his Roman plays intending to furnish Tudors with a particular representation of "the most important people (humanly speaking) who ever lived, the concern of every educated man in Europe," and that he did so in ways memorable and compelling enough to influence England's emergent sense of itself as nation.[1] Elizabethans looked to Rome for paradigms of military, political, artistic, and cultural excellence, and they found among the Romans case studies of leadership from the benevolent to the odious.[2]

In no less a prominent publication than the First Folio, Ben Jonson famously accused Shakespeare of having "small Latin and less Greek," a swipe that ignores the bard's grammar school education in Roman literature, history, and rhetoric, not to mention his adult life spent in a city modeled on Rome.[3] It is ironic, then, that Jonson's 1603 play about political conspiracy in Rome, *Sejanus His Fall*, in which Shakespeare himself acted on the stage, would owe so much to Shakespeare's own *Julius*

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*Caesar*. In addition to Shakespeare's four explicitly Roman plays, which include *Titus Andronicus* and the three tragedies based on Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, no fewer than thirteen of Shakespeare's forty or so works are set in the world of ancient Greece or Rome, or one-third of his published plays, as Jonathan Bate observed. Included in these plays is a timeline that stretches from the Trojan war to the assassination of Julius Caesar and the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.[4]

In his histories and Roman tragedies, Shakespeare achieves a *narrative of nation* by configuring legends, lands, rite and ritual, and fights and figures into a symbolic world of representation and a discourse of national belonging. This symbolic world helped to "structure the way England (or possibly Britain) came to perceive itself as unique and separated from the rest of the world," as Domenico Lovascio writes.[5] As a coherent body of work, this meta story helped Elizabethans to see themselves "in the imaginary as somehow sharing in an overarching collective narrative," as Stuart Hall put it, such that their otherwise humdrum, everyday existence came to be connected with a great national destiny that existed prior to them and that would outlive them.[6] This history is not linear, marked as it is by discontinuities as much as by continuity, by unevenness rather than unbroken evolution, and by rascals every bit as much as by champions. The plays' scenes, settings, and figures oppose each other in wonderfully complex ways, yet together enact a larger national story and gather audiences by animating this national heritage and history. Shakespeare thus becomes "that privileged signifier of Englishness," the only dramatist who is required reading in all of England's schools.[7] It is perhaps ironic that one of the primary sources for English school boys for the official history of Caesar became Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* more than, say, Caesar's own *Commentaries*.

Focusing on *Julius Caesar* and Coriolanus, this article finds in these dramas a catalog of the evils of tyranny and authoritarianism as presented by a wonderfully vivid cast of deeply flawed, startlingly relevant rulers. Shakespeare's enactment of tyranny's threat to any idea of a "commonwealth" features the unforgettable stage figures of Coriolanus, Brutus, Marc Anthony, and Julius Caesar, who, if imagined as a sort of Shakespearean chorus, might be heard to be shouting, "*Sic semper tyrannis*!" The two Roman

plays also enact and warn against the fickleness and absurdities of public opinion. Citizens' willingness to be lied to makes light work for demagogues who prove indifferent to the truth. As Stephen Greenblatt diagnosed it, a self-confident, self-styled populist can easily exploit tribalism or factionalism to create a dangerous space in which "two and two do not have to equal four, and the most recent assertion need not remember the contradictory assertion that was made a few seconds earlier."[8] Greenblatt was thinking about both *Julius Caesar* and Donald Trump, whose four years in the White House brought renewed interest in ideas of tyranny and in the many forms tyrants can take. Greenblatt's book, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*, seeks an answer to what in 2016 became a startlingly contemporary question: "How is it possible for a whole country to fall into the hands of a tyrant?"[9]

In Elizabethan England, the theater mediated the ideas about nationhood that Shakespeare's facile mind created and animated. As a mass medium experienced bodily, London's plays influenced the collective imagination by creating *witnesses* to the re-creation of English history. Englishmen re-enacted, appropriated, and incorporated English and Roman history as national history, both re-creating and creating a knowledge of the past by and for those in the present. Thomas Heywood wrote in 1612, "To turne to our domesticke hystories: what English blood, seeing the person of any bold Englishman presented, and doth not hugge his fame . . . as if the personator were the man personated? so bewitching a thing is lively and well-spirited action, that it hath power to new-mold the harts of the spectators."[10] To which, in Coriolanus, the tribune Sicinius might say, "What is the city [or nation] but the people?" (3.1.232).[11]

Shakespeare built worlds out of various historical moments and classical Roman stories, producing wholly new meanings via a constellation of cautionary symbols. By demonstrating on the stage how kings and clowns so obviously unqualified to govern could, in spite of their mendacity, cruelty, and venality, persuade a people to follow them, often ardently, the playwright avoids putting the blame entirely on history's tyrants. Fickle, self-seeking publics are culpable in both plays, a topic that Greenblatt explores and for which he creates a typology of "enablers." In *Julius Caesar*, Roman citizens are perfectly willing to believe the lie and ignore the

looming danger of authoritarianism, offering a crown in "foolery" rather than a rebuke, and not once, not twice, but three times.

In this reading, Shakespeare is a social memory maker; in some ways he is the social memory maker, who selects, adapts, and manipulates history, stories, and traditions for theater goers. His audiences, it must be recognized, received but also ignored and adapted what they saw and heard through the filters of their own interests. Seeing the plays together furnished this penny public with a set of memories that, while neither uniform nor stable, did constitute a collectivity. The "circulation of recollections among members of a given community," public memory encompasses what a public remembers, how that public frames these remembrances, and what aspects they ignore or forget.[12] As social or public memory, Shakespeare's plays provided a subjective reconstruction of a national past that looked also to the future, giving this history and this drama the two faces of Janus looking back and looking ahead. As drama, the past is re-enacted and made present and, thus, drama makes that past alive again even as how to move forward is being deliberated upon and decided by the body politic. Playgoers over the centuries have wept over historical events that Shakespeare's plays enact as *contemporary experiences*. Consider the future Richard III's wooing of Anne in the presence of the bleeding corpse of her father-in-law. This sort of communal reception and emotional involvement, accessible to even the illiterate, created the circumstances for the making of powerful bonds of common identity and something we might call national consciousness.

Rome's past cast long shadows on Elizabethan cultural and political thought, permeating England's social imagination and supplying playwrights such as Shakespeare, Jonson, and Christopher Marlowe with a sort of "boxed set" of events, figures, political lessons, and history to draw on. Jonathan Bate's *How the Classics Made Shakespeare* documents this Elizabethan reliance on the Romans and the Greeks, an English "intelligence of antiquity" in the sixteenth century that Shakespeare drew from and to which he contributed much. In fact, in so vividly enacting the classical tradition, Shakespeare *became* the classical tradition. Bate finds and explains the multiplicity of political and cultural imperatives that drove the Elizabethan urge to imitate Roman exemplars. And the Elizabethans were not alone in their fascination with a Roman past

portrayed as a consistent, continuous history, for it is evidenced also in the founding documents, place names, and monuments of the United States.[13]

Conveniently, a re-imagined Roman past seemed to grant writers and thinkers a structured imaginative space in which a sense of national unity could be fashioned in such a way as to seem familiar, a past inhabited by ancient Romans from whom the English claim to be descended, but with plenty of room also for innovation. Many Tudor classrooms used Caesar's *Commentaries* as a textbook from which English schoolboys learned Latin, and sixteenth-century theaters seemed at times to be fixated on the ethical models the Roman Republic offered. Thus, "a play about ancient Rome or ancient Troy was not an escapist documentary about a faraway world," as Marjorie Garber puts it, but something very like "a powerful lesson in modern . . . ethics and statecraft."[14] Plays such as *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* animated an ethical sense of "Roman" virtue on the stage, providing playgoers with images of that virtue that complemented a vast amount of material culture doing the same, including poetry such as the *Rape of Lucrece*, tapestries, visual allusions, stained glass, speeches, and literature.[15]

## Julius Caesar

Gerald K. Hunter has said that Shakespeare's typical "Roman" character can be read as shorthand readily recognizable by his audiences as a set of virtues that are "soldierly, severe, self-controlled, disciplined," virtues that add up to Roman integrity. Rome in this context provides a past for Elizabethans that wasn't "simply *a* past but *the* past," as Hunter put it, "since it led to the present."[16] As a set, these virtues explain what the playwright meant when he writes of Antony being struck by a "Roman thought," in *Antony and Cleopatra*'s Act I, to point to just one example. Similarly, for Quentin Skinner, Livy's history of Rome, which is assumed to be one of Shakespeare's principal sources for *Julius Caesar*, along with Plutarch's *Lives*, furnished "the most important conduit for the transmission to early-modern Europe" of the *civitas libera*, or free state, in its account of the early republic and its institutions.[17] The acts both in war and peace of the people of Rome are those of a "free state," "the good and wholesome fruits of libertie," writes Livy,

in Book 2. This free state submitted to "the authoritie and rule of laws, more powerfull and mightie than that of men," language that seems to echo Cicero's ideas about civitas, the social body of the *cives*, or citizens, who are united by law and under a rule of law.[18]

Throughout the Roman plays, "Roman" connotes a robust list of moral qualities and character traits, including constancy, fidelity, perseverance, self-discipline, respect for tradition, and a sense of honor. If these qualities can be summed up in one virtue, it would be nobility. A word search of "nob*," to capture all instances of noble (for example, nobles, nobler, noblest, and nobility) in *Julius Caesar*, yielded a total of forty-five mentions, with Antony's reference to Brutus in Act V as "the noblest Roman of them all" fittingly the last of these mentions in the play. In the opening act, "noble blood" is conflated with all that is good in Rome and, therefore, that which is put at risk if the plebeians are allowed to continue venerating Caesar as a demi-god. The assassination plot's chief instigator, the senator Cassius, drips with sarcasm in the second scene of Act I as he describes Caesar as predator, feeding on the meat of Rome such that its noble blood is lost. As Cassius's memorable lines attest, to not possess or exhibit nobility and its constituent qualities is to not be Roman. For example, as Warren Chernaik noted, in Act I of *Julius Caesar*, nearly all mentions of "Rome" or "Roman" have persuasive intent; they are used by enemies of Caesar to inspire republican independence and self-reliance and to pour "scorn on those who fail to live up to these ideals."[19] For Cassius, tyranny is by no means inevitable. The senators can act, and as free men they must act. It is this logic and concern for the common good that persuades Brutus to join in the conspiracy. When Flavius and Murellus look in on a crowd "making holiday" to see Caesar and to "rejoice in his triumph," Murellus snarls:

> Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?
> What tributaries follow him to Rome
> To grace in captive bonds his chariot wheels?
> You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things:
> O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome,
> Knew you not Pompey? (1.1.29-34)

Among Rome's shadows, none were taller than that of the "colossus," the subject of so much myth that in early modern English drama Caesar became synecdoche for *Romanitas*, a

model for civilization, culture, and society. Perhaps explaining Shakespeare's fascination with Caesar, at least in part, the would-be emperor's biography allows for a number of interpretations, but certainly in Shakespeare's age he was admired; his assassins merited opprobrium for their venal, vicious treason that occasioned nothing less than civil war. For Elizabethan playwrights, however, the hypocritical, ungrateful, coldly calculating, liberty-wrecking, and, above all, ambitious Caesar proved irresistible, an interpretation amply provided by only a few alterations of the source texts. Did Caesar conspire with Catiline? Were his expeditions to Gaul and Britain heroic or brutal? Did he orchestrate the civil war? In *De Officiis* (*Offices*), Cicero casts Caesar as a treasonous murderer of his own country and, therefore, "a parricidium in the Roman legal sense of treason, which framed Caesar as a criminal of the deepest dye," Lovascio writes.[20] A letter by Cicero deplored Caesar as he "who causeth himselfe to be called the Monarchall Emperour."[21]

But Shakespeare seems to play both sides of the fence, never stating unequivocally whether Caesar is in fact a tyrant or even genuinely presents the threat of becoming a tyrant. There is conflicting evidence. As Madeleine Doran wrote, "until Caesar is dead . . . we hear nothing positively good about him, and afterwards nothing bad."[22] From Caesar himself, we hear relatively little; few title characters have so few lines. Thus, Caesar is more talked about than heard speaking himself. The result is a political canvas for others to paint on, and paint they do. The audience has to figure it out for themselves, which might be Shakespeare's genius, because it means the audience has to reason. More likely is the playwright's knowledge of the audience's familiarity with the many accounts of the historical Caesar in which he is very much the tyrant.

The imaginative turn in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is not asking how it is possible for a whole country to fall into the hands of a tyrant but whether a few good men can stop a tyrant before it is too late and, depending on the interpretation, before the leader has in fact become a tyrant, especially as streets fill with easily manipulated mobs hailing him as Colossus. These few virtuous citizens are led by Brutus, who is such a central figure that Garber has wondered whether the play should instead be named for him; Caesar appears in but five scenes of the play, not counting appearances of and inferences to his ghost or spirit. Although

suicide is presented as the morally good and right response to the looming despotism, rather than contemplate that option as Cassius does, Brutus quickly—many would say far too quickly—instead begins to plot Caesar's death. Caesar must not be crowned, Brutus believes, or is led to believe by Cassius, for that act would "change his nature" and elicit the viper "that craves wary walking: crown him that" (2.1.13-15).

Brutus's ruminations, to which Shakespeare viscerally provides access—we experience Brutus's thinking and "reasoning," if reasoning it is, *as* Brutus does, in real dramatic time—are strikingly similar to an anonymously written op-ed published in the *New York Times* in September 2018, a piece written by a "senior administration official" that opened a troubling view into a White House seemingly divided against itself.[23] The writer warned that at least some in that White House were deeply concerned about a tweeter-as-president who craved wary walking. Crown him that! "The dilemma—which he does not fully grasp," the anonymous *Times* writer mused, referring to Trump, "is that many of the senior officials in his own administration are working diligently from within to frustrate parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations." As if an echo of Brutus, this inside-the-White House writer penned, "But we believe our first duty is to this country, and the president continues to act in a manner that is detrimental to the health of our republic."[24] Brutus in the first scene of Act II similarly considers the danger to nation its leader presents, which is nothing short of "an insurrection" (II.i.69). Brutus can find no comfort in a secure position in government while ideals, assumed values and mores, the rule of law, and notions of the common good, however vague they might be, are tossed into the air like confetti at a victory parade. And we know how much tyrants love parades, especially those of the military variety. Brutus's seemingly inescapable course of action is regicide, to "kill him in the shell" before evil can be hatched from its egg (2.1.34).

The threat of tyranny in the person of Caesar is foregrounded so early in the play that it is not obvious to theater goers that the character is in fact a tyrant. Caesar's designs are ambiguous, and hints about his fragility and waning vitality work to de-fang the sense of foment and urgent danger to the republic Caesar might pose or inspire. The urgency has to be manufactured, in other words,

which is why the conspirators spring to action. In Act II, Cassius and Casca see their autonomy at risk, or say they do, justifying their claim that Caesar must be defied on behalf of the republic. Punctuated by booming thunder, Cassius tells Casca that to remain free, to deliver himself from bondage, tyranny must be shaken off. Just a scene earlier, Cassius committed to "shaking" Caesar, "or worse days endure" (1.2.330). Brutus is easily persuaded that he and his countrymen sit on the eve of totalitarianism, predisposing him to assassination. In the first scene of Act II, Brutus warns that not to act is to allow "high-sighted tyranny range on / Till each man drop by lottery" (2.1.123-124). When the bloody deed is done, Cinna the poet shouts, "Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead! / Run hence, proclaim, cry it about the streets" (3.1.85-86).

The conspirators' bloody butchering does prevent tyranny, but it also invites civil war, a potential made more real because of one of the great speeches in all of Shakespeare, Marc Antony's entreaty to "Friends, Romans, countrymen" (3.2.80). That Brutus and Marc Antony are both so compelling as speechmakers underlines the prismatic features of the play: in a scene that resembles a trial, the arguments both for and against the assassination are equally persuasive. Even the great speeches in Act III can be interpreted different ways. Perhaps in his Roman tragedies more so than any other genre, Shakespeare presents multiple sides of the many arguments and disputes. Throughout Shakespeare's history plays, it is the peril of civil disunion that looms largest and most dangerous, the threat that more than any other single danger Shakespeare warns against, critiques, and parodies. Consider the many "weeds in the garden" scenes that populate the plays and the many gardeners in whose hands and words and minds lie the keys to the health of the kingdom.

More than despotism or dictatorship, the foe of England in *Julius Caesar* is civil strife mobilized by forces whose motives rarely rise above self-interest and prestige. Brutus's ideals—honor, the common good, liberty—are bloodied along with his and his co-conspirators' crimson hands, such that he, like Cassius, believes he must end his own life. That so many turn to suicide is perhaps a metaphor for the national suicide of civil war. This is the import of Antony's speech in Act III, when he suggests that the butchery of Caesar shall bring a curse and elicit Caesar's vengeful spirit.

It is an oration that evokes the abattoir and the morgue, replete with references to bleeding and blood and to butchery, burial, and death. Infants are quartered, ruby red lips drip with blood, and "carrion men" carry the stench of foul deeds.

Antony's speech is reminiscent of Carlisle in *Richard II* when he predicts that if Richard is deposed, the "blood of English shall manure the ground" while "future ages groan" because of the "foul act" (4.1.131-132). Antony warns against "fierce civil strife," anarchy, and chaos. In pitting, as Carlisle phrases it, "kin with kin and kind with kind," this chaos will be the confounding of natural order, of families, and of nation. What is conspicuously absent from Antony's oration that is so noticeable in Carlisle's, is pity. Antony is looking forward to what comes next, the unleashing of "the dogs of war."[25] He rouses the crowd to this end, soliciting the help of "Mischief": "Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot: / Take thou what course thou wilt" (3.2.257-258). These are the words of insurrection, incitement, and civil war. To articulate the threat that is afoot is to bring that threat closer, especially if too much thinking about the unthinkable can become acceptance of the unacceptable.

With Brutus and his co-conspirators gone, Antony is loosed and the myth and spirit of Caesar become, with Antony, the agents of revenge. Absent, however, is any firm foundation on which to build a government. The plebeians cannot be trusted; they go from cheering Brutus to following Antony into chaos in forty-three lines. "This Caesar was a tyrant," they cry in III.ii.64. By line 107, they are of the shared opinion that "Caesar has had great wrong." While it is quite a testimony to the power of rhetoric and public speaking, Antony's oratory should not so easily sway the collective mind of the crowds. That it does dramatizes what Gustave Le Bon would later call the "mental unity" of crowds, or the single entity formed in the mass of individuals we call crowds that subsumes the agenda and motivations of any one member. This "unity" is found in a collection of barbarians who respond instinctively to stimuli, and they often do so spontaneously, with violence, ferocity, and enthusiasm. Easily influenced by words and images, these erstwhile "individuals" can be induced to commit acts contrary to any one person's obvious interests, beliefs, and even morals.[26] Tragically, the "Stop the Steal" rally and subsequent riot at the U.S. Capitol on

January 6, 2021, demonstrated anew the raw destructive power of frenzied crowds and what is popularly called a "mob mentality," even on the steps and in the halls and offices of a monument to an otherwise functioning body of democracy and representative government.

Notably, Brutus never saw the danger of allowing Antony to orate. Responding to Cassius's warning against Antony as inspirational speaker, Brutus says, "By your pardon: / I will myself into the pulpit first, / And show the reason of our Caesar's death" (III.i.253-5). Thus, he disastrously overestimates plebeian crowds and, therefore, underestimates their fickleness and manipulability. This is hubris of another kind. Thus, it is the politics of fear that is the danger about which Shakespeare most eloquently warns. Again, the contemporary resonance of *Julius Caesar* is striking, because fear remains an effective, even pervasive form of political rhetoric in the United States and in many countries around the world. Oskar Eustis's timely and controversial production of the *Julius Caesar* in Central Park in the summer of 2017 demonstrated this with a staging that styled Caesar as Trump-like.[27] The verisimilitude led sponsors to cancel and play-goers to walk out. Five years prior to Eustis's staging, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis put on a production that featured the assassination by right-wing conspirators of an Obama-like Caesar, a production with hip-hop, basketball, and video projections, but little controversy.[28] And in 1937 on the eve of World War II, Orson Welles staged a landmark anti-fascist production at the Mercury Theater with a Caesar that recalled Mussolini. Even in Shakespeare's time, the play's staging would have been recognized for its echoes of the political plots swirling around the crown, none of them more ominously than the potential usurpation by the Earl of Essex.

## Coriolanus

Essex's popularity raised for Elizabeth the question of what to do with a returning soldier. This is the question in *Coriolanus*, as well, a play Shakespeare likely used to open the Globe Theatre in 1599, just as Essex was leading an English army in Ireland.[29] Thus, the threats of civil war and political disintegration appear again in a Roman context in Coriolanus, Shakespeare's last political play. The tragic pessimism of *Julius Caesar*, which had been written ten years

prior, seems simply to continue along an inexorable trajectory. Like Caesar's, Coriolanus's vices are simply the underside of his virtues. His "moral assets disqualify him for political success," as Norman Rabkin writes.[30] Coriolanus's mother, Volumnia, tells him flatly:

> You are too absolute,
> Though therein you can never be too noble,
> But when extremities speak. (3.2.49-51)

There is another, perhaps counter-intuitive way to interpret the granite absolutism of the would-be warrior king. For theologian Karl Barth, at the center of world history and in every sphere of human life is sloth, one of the seven deadly sins, albeit one of that list's lesser known and ill considered. But sloth for Barth is not what sloth means in common parlance; laziness would not seem to be Coriolanus's problem. Quite the contrary. A close reading of Barth's take on sloth as a multi-faceted "sin" provides in its facets perhaps the case Shakespeare can be read to be making against tyranny in the form of *Coriolanus*. "Can be read" is the operative phrase because to suggest that the playwright makes a case for or against anything is to risk reckless conjecture. Interpretation of intent in Shakespeare invariably reveals much more about the interpreter than it does about Shakespeare. Perhaps it is enough to say that the rough outlines for such a case can be seen or interpreted in the emphases the playwright chooses to make and in the liberties with history he takes. The stakes are high enough to take the interpretive risk, for the end of the Roman republic (and the rise of autocratic rule) proved the end also for democracy, generally understood, for about two millennia.

At the root or base of sloth, for Barth, is stupidity, or believing that "we can authoritatively tell ourselves what is true and good."[31] Sloth's other facets include inhumanity, or the inability or refusal to care or show affection for neighbor and countryman; dissipation, or failing to act when and where action is needed; and an anxious self-care that either opts out or acts out, usually aggressively, in the face of death or, in the case of Coriolanus, under the threat of banishment, which is a form of civic death suffered by so many of Shakespeare's characters. Thus, sloth manifests as a life that is "pursued without regard for the enduring health of community and place" or nation.[32] It might explain a switch of allegiance from Rome to the Volscians out of personal ambition or pride. Markku Peltonen cited Coriolanus's failure to embrace learning and,

thereby, the essential virtues of negotium as the character's "most serious defect," the one on which all his other flaws ultimately hinged.[33] Wisdom was out of reach. Such disregard for one's own ignorance can easily be interpreted as being connected to what eighteenth-century English critic William Hazlitt called "the insolence of power." Coriolanus's assertion of his own essentiality even as he spits contempt for the "ordinary, unheroic people forced to scratch a living" can be read as just this sort of insolence.[34] Such tyranny pairs privilege and oppression, a sloth-full tandem the play presents as chief threat to the republic and the body politic.

Coriolanus curses from the outset of his play, grunting in clipped, tweet-length pulses. In Act I, with none of the practice and polish of the orators in Julius Caesar, and in sharp contrast to the great orator and embodiment of the republic, Cicero, Coriolanus bellows with bile:

> All the contagion of the south light on you,
> You shames of Rome! You herd of—boils and plagues
> Plaster you o'er, that you may be abhorred
> Further than seen, and one infect another
> Against the wind a mile: you souls of geese
> That bear the shapes of men, how have you run
> From slaves that apes would beat! Pluto and hell: (1.4.35-41)

One might think he was addressing a former aide upon the release of a tell-all book, or chastising an exiled personal lawyer once entrusted with his most vital and damaging secrets, including payoffs to porn stars and Playboy models, or perhaps berating journalists for watchdogging his use and misuse of power, as they are missionally obligated to do by their nation's founding documents and law.

Coriolanus believes himself to be above electioneering, posturing, and campaigning, but more damning is his estimation of himself as above the community for which he has fought and conquered. He refuses even to show them his war wounds as evidence of his chief claim to power, which is valor on the battlefield. His disdain for the electorate is visceral:

> Behold, these are the tribunes of the people,
> The tongues o'th'common mouth. I do despise them,
> For they do prank them in authority,
> Against all noble sufferance. (3.1.26-29)

Later in the same scene, Coriolanus calls the commonwealth "the mutable, rank-scented meinie" that can be counted on for little more than "rebellion, insolence, sedition," the same people who he and his noble friends "ploughed for, sowed and scattered" (3.1.82-87). This "cockle of rebellion" is incapable of pursuing the best interests of Rome and, thus, Coriolanus has ruled out the credibility of *any* election, including and especially the one that might anoint him consul. Politically, such a move is not unlike claiming massive voter fraud, vote tampering, and Chinese meddling in elections before they are even held, without a shred of actionable evidence, and after disbanding the election integrity commission authorized to investigate exactly these potential harms. To so recklessly hurl aspersions is to detonate the very process the candidate needs to assume power and the process on which the credibility of the would-be ruler's government would depend.

Coriolanus authoritatively proclaims to himself what is not true and not good; he seeks to stand apart and above, disdaining even to "mingle" with the people. His vitriol is such that Brutus recoils:

> You speak o'th'people as if you were a god
> To punish, not a man of their infirmity. (3.1.99-100)

The logical and inevitable result of a leader's contempt for those he has been elected to govern is that such a leader cannot be expected to pursue that electorate's interests, even that he believes such citizens cannot know for themselves their own best interests. Lacking basic intelligence and reason, the citizens, the rebellious "barbarians" in Coriolanus's terms, should have their rights taken away. Though the events of *Coriolanus* take place long before those of *Julius Caesar*, it is as if Coriolanus had read or seen *Julius Caesar* and taken note: Do not trust the crowd.

In depicting such a tyrant, "the strangely pitiless dramatist," who, as A. D. Nuttall writes, has "not a grain of compassion for the hunger of the starving in this play," fails to include even a line of condemnation.[35] Coriolanus's hostility, however, proves to be political suicide as the people turn on him. The tribune Brutus declares late in Act III that, "There's no more to be said, but he is banish'd" as an enemy of the people and, therefore, of Rome. The citizens subsequently ratify Brutus's verdict: "I say it shall be so"

(3.3.126). Sealing his fate, Coriolanus huffs and puffs and blows fire:

> You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
> As reek o'th'rotten fens: whose loves I prize
> As the dead carcasses of unburied men
> That do corrupt my air: I banish you,
> And here remain with your uncertainty.
> Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts:
> . . .
> For you, the city. Thus I turn my back:
> There is a world elsewhere. (3.3.144-149, 158-159)

If Shakespeare can be read as arguing against civic ills, it might be that failure on the part of either the governed or their governors is failure of the entire nation. Certainly, the theme of civil disunion's danger is continued. Coriolanus disdains, even curses, the citizens, who he believes to be rebellious. Being so disdained and cursed by their supposed leader, the citizens not surprisingly respond with hostility and, eventually, violence. Is the political debacle that results the fault of the people or of their leader who so aggressively goaded them? Each denies the legitimacy of the other; each banishes the other as enemy of the nation.

Reading Barth's exegesis of sloth as an indictment, Coriolanus is guilty of both stupidity and of inhumanity, or the inability or refusal to care or show affection for neighbor and countryman. In fact, so incapable of affection for countryman is Coriolanus that he is described variously in the chronicles as machine, engine, and thing. Coriolanus's "thingness" is a theme Shakespeare foregrounds in the play by showcasing Coriolanus's lack of facility with words and conversation, his immoveable commitment to his particular sense of integrity of self and, therefore, unwillingness to "act" or play the part of the politician, and his drone-like obedience to the remote-control direction and manipulations of his mother. These flaws conjure Coriolanus as soul-less "thing": a harvester, a mower, a weapon of mindless mass destruction. To the Roman general Cominius, Coriolanus is the citizens' god, leading them "like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature, / That shapes man better" (4.6.109-111). Menenius, too, calls Coriolanus a "thing," an "engine," a cold, even brutal banality brought to bear against his own nature (5.4.13, 15). The author of much of that nature,

Volumnia, herself draws attention to the "thingness" of her son when praising him for his prowess on the battlefield:

> his bloody brow
> With his mailed hand then wiping, forth he goes,
> Like to a harvest-man that's tasked to mow
> Or all or lose his hire (1.3.26-29)

It is conspicuous that in a key scene, the second scene of Act III, Shakespeare furnishes Volumnia with sixty-one lines and, as response, the harvesting, threshing, mowing son can muster but eight monosyllabic lines. As Nuttall summarizes the character, "There is something very sad in the way this artfully brutalized piece of nothingness is at last brought to deny its own conditioning."[36] For Rabkin, the image presented throughout the play is "of a terrifying automatic warrior, the inhuman mechanism of destruction."[37]

For evidence of dissipation, or of taking no action where it is urgently needed, Shakespeare foregrounds the corn riots in a mashup of Roman and English history perhaps meant to help Elizabethan audiences make connections, emotional and otherwise. Shakespeare's Roman mob mirrors the 1607 Midland Revolt in England that occurred just prior to the writing of *Coriolanus*. For some critics, this blending of historical events is evidence of the playwright's own contempt for the common people, even for democracy.[38] And yet elections are held in the play, a "specimen," in A. D. Nuttall's description, of "rudimentary democratic machinery" and one of a few moments in the two Roman plays when the desires and designs of the people are made known.[39] In addition, parallels with the Midlands Revolt are part of a portrayal of the citizens of Rome as "capable of reasoning" and of rational deliberation, as Annabel Patterson has noted.[40]

Importantly, in Act II, these same citizens Coriolanus so reviles are shown to be civil, even patient with the contemptuous and contemptible would-be consul in a depiction that underlines the warrior-leader's lack of both civility and patience. This "rabble" of rakes is seen and heard deliberating, debating, and ultimately choosing Coriolanus, knowing full well his virtues and vices. In short, as Chernaik observes, "the Roman citizens consistently follow the rules of the game" even while Coriolanus flatly rejects the rules, the game, and anyone willing to play it.[41] Bate called this

the dilemma of the play: to be successful in war a state needs strong leadership, but the restless man of military action has no time for the inglorious arts of peace.[42]

While trotting out the usual parade of Roman officials, customs, manners, and allusions, Shakespeare takes great liberties with history in depicting *Coriolanus*'s corn riots, and such license in his plays always invites analysis. While seemingly quite careful to get the play's literary allusions right and, conspicuously, avoid the anachronisms that his contemporaries enjoyed ridiculing him for, Shakespeare freely manipulates his Roman and English history.[43] Plutarch's *Life of Coriolanus* presents public dissatisfaction displayed mainly through passive resistance. In Shakespeare's hands, however, the reaction to famine resulting from drastic hikes in food prices is revolt.[44] This Hydra wants the reins of government, but in *Coriolanus* as in *Julius Caesar*, the many-headed monster is incapable, even unqualified by nature, to take them. "[I]f all our wits were to issue out of one skull, they would fly east, west, north, south, and their consent of one direct way should be at once to all the points o'th'compass," one citizen confesses (II.iii.14-16). It is this instability and unreliability that disqualify the citizens to assume power, a theme repeated in several of Shakespeare's history plays.[45]

And yet nowhere in the play does Shakespeare declare Coriolanus wrong or, more appropriately, unfit and possibly immoral.[46] In the food shortages of the early seventeenth century as in Yemen in 2018 and in Ireland during its many famines, people went hungry and even perished not because there was, in absolute terms, a shortage of food, but because action was not taken by the wealthy and powerful to get food to those who most needed it. This is sloth. In the New Testament's Book of James, the writer admonishes the "rich people" that the right response to such material need is to "weep and wail," because while the poor starved, the rich hoarded. "You have fattened yourself in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent ones" (James 5:1-6, New International Version). In admonishing the one-percenters and tending to his poor flock, James equates inaction with murder. It is a startling accusation. Similarly, in *Coriolanus*, a citizen pleads in the first scene:

> Care for us? True, indeed, they ne'er cared for us yet. Suffer us to
> famish, and their store-houses crammed with grain: make edicts for usury, to
> support usurers: repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and
> provide more piercing statutes daily, to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars
> eat us not up, they will: and there's all the love they bear us. (1.1.59-63)

The oppressive forces depicted in Shakespeare and in James are similar. The playwright portrays the starving poor as unstable, fickle, incapable, and violent. In Shakespeare's larger project, consciously or not he is dramatizing how violent political disorder occurs and the damage that is done to the nation as a unit. Preventing this disorder is the responsibility of all of any nation's constituent parts. Mostly by negative example, the Roman tragedies, as Shakespeare's history plays, put into stark relief the indivisibility of the body politic from that body's government, be it a monarchy, a republic, or a democracy, as well as the necessity of the rule of law as a binding principle. In establishing cause-and-effect, Shakespeare can be read as exalting a "horizontal comradeship" and shared character that marks a healthy sense of nation.[47]

There is ample evidence of the virtues of order, political harmony, and self-sacrifice toward a greater, common good, but nowhere does Shakespeare seem to commit himself or the play to such a program.[48] Various interpretations compete even four centuries after its penning. The genius of Shakespeare's presentation of contradictions without resolution, without a clear endorsement or condemnation, explains in part why *Coriolanus* has been staged in such different ways. The play has been more popular in continental Europe than in Britain; more than a hundred performances in Germany were staged in each of the decades between 1910 and 1940. Translations published in Nazi Germany described Coriolanus as "the true hero and Führer" who led an otherwise misled people, a false democracy . . . weaklings."[49] A production at the Comédie Française in 1933 led to riots by socialists and fascists that eventually closed down the theater. By 1977, however, at least one German production excised from the

play anything that might lead an audience to sympathize with the warrior machine.[50]

## Conclusion

For tyrants as for radical right-wing elements across the globe, the means to power include the institutions of a free society and fear-motivated populism and nationalism. Designed to prevent tyranny, these institutions are, for the would-be tyrant, a one-way street dismantled or de-fanged once that tyrant wears the proverbial crown. Such a disaster of sovereignty can only occur with widespread complicity, which is the problem Shakespeare so vividly enacts in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, plays that ask, as Greenblatt identified the question, whether there is a way to stop a commonwealth from abandoning its ideals, self-interest, and even common sense and authorizing a "leader" obviously unfit to govern.[51]

Shakespeare used his theater to warn against both tyrants *and* the base instincts and tribal tendencies of disgruntled, disenfranchised citizens and the factionalized politics that pseudo-populist "movements" require. A reach back to an ancient Rome for contemporary, Elizabethan-era dramas that so aptly describes twenty-first century contexts reveals a playwright acutely aware of the fragility of national identity and the common good. A society splintered into irrational political tribes is "particularly vulnerable to the fraudulent populism," Greenblatt concluded. "And there are always instigators who arouse tyrannical ambition, and enablers, people who perceive the danger posed by this ambition but who think they will be able to control the successful tyrant."[52]

We will never know what Shakespeare's intentions in so vividly manifesting such threats to even relatively stable societies such as his were, beyond, of course, an afternoon spent being entertained and diverted. But, we can marvel at a rhetorician so aware of the complexity and contingency of collective life and so able to create out of the fabric of language such memorable characters that could thrive in the resulting chaos until—*sic semper tyrannis*—cooler heads and a more rational body politic prevailed. Brutus hails both the "common weal" and the "ancient strength" of the people, conjuring notions of *libertas*. The Roman goddess *Libertas*, who was created with the republic to mark the overthrow of the

Tarquins, represents, therefore, the double-edged sword of revolt claimed in the name of the commonwealth.[53] The playwright created these characters and gave them words, all the while eluding or otherwise fooling Elizabeth's censors, in part by largely avoiding religion, but more by appropriating the historical past for playgoing experiences lived and then remembered in the present, albeit with "a certain degree of amnesia" necessary to remember in particular ways and to participate in the volatile negotiation of a new national consciousness.[54]

## Notes

1. T. J. B. Spencer, "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans," *Shakespeare Survey* 10 (1957): 28.

2. Domenico Lovascio, "Rewriting Julius Caesar as a National Villain in Early Modern English Drama," *English Literary Renaissance* 47, no. 2 (2017): 219. For more on how Rome permeated the Elizabethan and Jacobean social imagination, see Jonathan Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2019); Reuben Brower, *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Colin Burrow, Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Paul Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); Chris Fitter, *Majesty and the Masses in Shakespeare and Marlowe: Western Anti-Monarchism, The Earl of Essex Challenge, and Political Stagecraft* (London: Routledge, 2020); Lisa Hopkins, *The Cultural Uses of the Caesars on the English Renaissance Stage* (Aldershot, 2008); and Geoffrey Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

3. Dedicatory poem in the Shakespeare First Folio. The seeming pejorative appears about one-third into the poem of otherwise tribute to Jonson's "beloved" author, Shakespeare, implying that the line is back-handed praise. Colin Burrow, in *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, notes that Jonson's critique could alternatively mean "even supposing (counterfactually) that you only had a smattering of Latin and less Greek, the major classical dramatists would still admire you" (2).

4. Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, 9. One of Bate's stated purposes in writing his book is to "contextualize Shakespeare within the wider 'intelligence of antiquity' in England in the sixteenth century, for example by tracing the visual allusions to ancient Rome in Elizabethan London and by exploring the political and cultural imperatives that drove the urge to imitate Roman exemplars" (15).

5. Lovascio, "Rewriting Julius Caesar," 219.

6. Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 138.

7. Hall, *The Fateful Triangle*, 152.

8. Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2018), 38.

9. Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 1. The author is echoing A. D. Nuttall, who wrote in 1988 that in *Julius Caesar*, "we saw a fundamental problem of democracy

broached: what happens when the people choose tyranny?" A. D. Nuttall, "Shakespeare's Imitation of the World," 91-98, in Harold Bloom, ed., *William Shakespeare's Coriolanus* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 92.

10. Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors: In Three Books* (1612, reprinted London: The Shakespeare Society, 1841), 21.

11. All references to the play are to *The RSC William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (New York: The Modern Library, 2007).

12. Matthew Houdek and Kendall R. Phillips, "Public Memory," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-181.

13. See, for example, Gordon S. Wood, T*he Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011).

14. Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: First Anchor Books, 2005), 410.

15. George K. Hunter, "A Roman Thought: Renaissance Attitudes to History Exemplified in Shakespeare and Jonson," in *An English Miscellany Presented to W. S. Mackie*, ed. Brian S. Lee (Oxford University Press, 1977), 94.

16. Hunter, "A Roman Thought," 94-95.

17. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44. Fitter reads an anti-monarchic critique in Shakespeare's heavy use of republicanism, though he finds it mostly in the history plays (*Majesty and the Masses in Shakespeare and Marlowe*).

18. Warren Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 33; Cicero, Somnium Scipiones (De re publica, vi), c3.

19. Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries,* 79.

20. Lovascio, "Rewriting Julius Caesar," 233.

21. Markku Peltonen, *Classical Humanism and the Republicanism in English Political Thought*, 1570-1640 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 46, cited in Fitter, *Majesty and the Masses in Shakespeare and Marlowe*, 49.

22. Madeleine Doran, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Language* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 77.

23. The author, Miles Taylor, identified himself in October 2020. Michael Shear, "Miles Taylor, a Former Homeland Security Official, Reveals He Was 'Anonymous,'" *New York Times* (28 Oct. 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/28/us/politics/miles-taylor-anonymous-trump.html). Taylor was chief of staff at the Department of Homeland Security at the time of the published opinion (see note 30). The piece describes Trump as "impetuous, adversarial, petty and ineffective." Taylor also anonymously wrote *A Warning*, a book describing Trump as an "undisciplined" and "amoral" leader whose abuse of power threatened the foundations of American democracy. [Miles Taylor], *A Warning* (New York: Hachette Publishing, 2019). Taylor, who resigned from Homeland Security in June 2019, published his admissions online: https://milestaylor.medium.com/a-statement-a13bc5173ee9.

24. Anonymous, "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration," *New York Times*, 5 September 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html.

25. Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 102.

26. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1892, republished New York: Dover Publications, 2002).

27. Michael Paulson, "Oskar Eustis on Trump, 'Julius Caesar' and the Politics of Theater," *The New York Times*, 17 June 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/theater/donald-trump-julius-caesar-oskar-eustis.html. The production was for the Free Shakespeare in the Park series put on by the Delacorte Theater.

28. For information on and an excerpt of the play, see Rob Melrose, "Julius Caesar—The Guthrie Theater," 2013. http://www.robmelrose.com/julius-caesar.html.

29. Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, 114.

30. Norman Rabkin, "The Polity in Coriolanus," in Harold Bloom, ed. *William Shakespeare's Coriolanus* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 52.

31. Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 140.

32. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 142.

33. Peltonen, *Classical Humanism and the Republicanism in English Political Thought*, 172.

34. Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome*, 180. In the Trump administration, such insolence was evidenced often, including its "Find Something New" campaign to encourage those jobless to learn a new skill. "Now as a result of COVID, people need to, unfortunately, in some cases, learn a completely new skill," Ivanka Trump said in announcing the tone-deaf campaign. "White House-Backed Campaign Pushes Alternate Career Paths," *New York Times*, 14 July 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/07/14/business/bc-us-white-house-jobs-campaign.html.

35. Nuttall, "Shakespeare's Imitation of the World," in Harold Bloom, ed., *William Shakespeare's Coriolanus* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 93.

36. Nuttall, "Shakespeare's Imitation of the World," 96.

37. Rabkin, "The Polity in Coriolanus," 56.

38. See, for example, George Brandes, in *William Shakespeare, A Critical Study* (New York: 1902), and M. W. MacCallum, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Background* (London, 1910), 470. Similarly, E. C. Pettet in 1950 pointed out that as a "substantial landowner," Shakespeare saw the Midlands Rising of 1607 as a threat to property. "Coriolanus and the Midlands Insurrection of 1607," *Shakespeare Survey* 3 (1950): 36-37.

39. Nuttall, "Shakespeare's Imitation of the World," 92.

40. Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 182.

41. Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 191.

42. Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, 113.

43. For evidence of literary care, see the references by the play's female characters to Homer and the Tale of Troy, as well as the very names of these characters, which all come straight from Plutarch.

44. Phillips, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Coriolanus, A Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice-Hall, 1970), 8.

45. Oscar James Campbell, "Shakespeare's Satire: Coriolanus," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Coriolanus*, 29.

46. Nuttall, "Shakespeare's Imitation of the World," 93.

47. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983), 7.

48. A. P. Rossiter, "Coriolanus," in Harold Bloom, ed., *William Shakespeare's Coriolanus* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 64.

49. Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 181.

50. Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 181.

51. Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 2.

52. Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 186.

53. See Chaim Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

54. Mark Lawrence McPhail, "A Question of Character: Re(-)signing the Racial Contract," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2004): 395.