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# SHAKESPEARE AND EARLY MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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*Shakespeare and the best state  
of a commonwealth*

*Eric Nelson*

Political thought in Shakespeare's Europe organised itself to a significant degree around the question of what constituted, in Cicero's words, 'the best state of a commonwealth'.<sup>1</sup> Thomas More famously offered his *Utopia* as a meditation upon this question, entitling the book *De optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula Utopia* ('On the best state of a commonwealth and the new island of Utopia'), and virtually every other humanist author had something extensive to say on the subject. In this respect, the early modern period was hardly unique; political writers had been interested in this question long before Plato raised it in the *Republic*, and they would continue to be interested in it even after Tocqueville declared the question dissolved in 1835.<sup>2</sup> What distinguishes the early modern period is rather the astonishing degree to which political writers of the age agreed that the answer to this question was to be found in the study of Roman history. To compare the relative merits of monarchy and civic self-government during this period was unavoidably to ask whether Rome had reached its zenith before or after the rise of the Caesars. Machiavelli, following in the footsteps of Leonardo Bruni and the other civic humanists of the Quattrocento, argued that the transition from republic to principality had been responsible for Roman decline. In Book II of the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli announces that 'experience shows that cities have never increased either in dominion or wealth, unless they have been free',<sup>3</sup> and that Rome attained its 'greatness' (*grandezza*) as a free state. The reason,

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Cicero, *De legibus* 1. 15. Cicero, *De republica, De legibus*, ed. and trans. C. W. Keyes (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), p. 312.

<sup>2</sup> Tocqueville argued that the rise of democracy was 'fated' and that, accordingly, the only relevant question was what kind of democracy one should wish to create. See Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. André Jardin, 2 vols. (Paris, 1986), I, p. 3; II, p. 455.

<sup>3</sup> 'si vede per esperienza le cittadini non avere mai ampliato né di dominio né di ricchezza se non mentre sono state in libertà'. See Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, ed. Giorgio Inglese (Milan, 1984), p. 297. English translations of the *Discorsi* are largely taken from Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. and trans. Bernard Crick (Harmondsworth, 1970).

he insists, is straightforward: 'it is not the well-being of individuals that makes cities great, but the well-being of the community; and it is beyond question that it is only in republics that the common good is looked to properly in that all that promotes it is carried out'.<sup>4</sup> In support of this claim, Machiavelli invokes a famous argument of the Roman historian Sallust, namely that a prince 'cannot bestow honours on the valiant and good citizens over whom he tyrannizes, since he does not want to have any cause to suspect them'.<sup>5</sup> Virtue is actively repressed in principalities, and since commonwealths cannot prosper without the efforts of virtuous men, rule by the many is clearly superior to rule by one alone.

The contrary position was, however, far more popular during this period. Jean Bodin, to take just one example, answers Machiavelli directly in his *Six livres de la république* (1576). He begins with a summary of his antagonist's view, writing (in the 1606 English translation of Richard Knolles) that:

There is one point that seems very considerable, to shew that a popular estate is the goodliest, the most excellent, and the most perfect, which is, That in a Democracy there have alwaies been greater commanders in armes, and worthier men in lawes, greater orators, philosophers and handicraftsmen than in the other two estates [i.e. monarchy and aristocracy]: whereas the faction of few great men among themselves, and the jealousy of a Monarcke keeps the subjects from all noble attempts.<sup>6</sup>

But, he continues, 'Machiavel is much deceived, to say, That a Popular estate is best.'<sup>7</sup> Bodin defends this claim by offering an ingenious inversion of Sallust's argument:

For the preservation of a Popular estate (if we shall beleve Xenophon)<sup>8</sup> is to advance the most vitious and unworthy men to offices and dignities. And if the people should be so ill advised, as to give offices of honour unto vertuous men, they loose their power: for that good men would favour none but the good,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.: 'non il bene particolare ma il bene comune è quello che fa grandi le città. E senza dubbio questo bene comune non è osservato se non nelle repubbliche; perché tutto quello che fa a proposito suo si eseguisce.'

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.: 'non può onorare nessuno di quegli cittadini, che siano valenti e buoni, che egli tiranneggia, non volendo avere ad avere sospetto di loro.' See also Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 6: 'Nam regibus boni quam mali suspectiores sunt semperque eis aliena virtus formidulosa est.' Sallust, *Works*, ed. and trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Mass., 1921), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *The Six Bookes of a Common-weale. Written by I. Bodin a famous lawyer, and a man of great experience in matters of state. Out of the French and Latine copies, done into English, by Richard Knolles* (London, 1606), p. 701.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 702.

<sup>8</sup> This is Pseudo-Xenophon, or the 'Old Oligarch', writing in the *Athenaion politeia*. Xenophon himself actually anticipates the Sallustian argument in *Hiero* 5, 1-2.

which are always fewer in number: and the wicked and vicious (which is the greatest part of the people) should be excluded from all honour, and by little and little banished: so as in the end wise men should seize upon the estate, and take it from the people.<sup>9</sup>

It is, according to Bodin, in the nature of republics, rather than monarchies, to repress virtue, because the rise of a virtuous man is a threat to the rule of the mediocre. 'They which doe so highly commend the Popular estate of the Romans', he insists, should recall how common it was for 'the furious Tribunes with their turbulent Orations, to threaten death or banishment to the best citizens',<sup>10</sup> whereas 'Augustus maintained them [the Romans] quietly in peace almost fiftie yeares, the which continued long after his death'.<sup>11</sup> Roman greatness came with the end of the republic. Accordingly, Bodin concludes that 'a pure absolute Monarchie is the surest Commonweale, and without comparison the best of all'.<sup>12</sup>

Not all early modern thinkers agreed with Machiavelli and Bodin that one could identify a single 'best state of a commonwealth'. But even those who were dubious about this proposition nonetheless tended to agree that, for any given commonwealth, there was always one regime to which it was best suited – and they used the Roman example to make this point. Thomas Smith, for instance, emphasised in his *De Republica Anglorum* (1583)<sup>13</sup> that the key task of constitutional design was to make sure that 'according to the nature of the people, so the Common-wealth is to it fit and proper'.<sup>14</sup> In his view, monarchy, aristocracy and Aristotle's 'polity' were all 'naturall' forms of political organisation, and 'when to each partie, or espeece and kind of the people, that is applied which best agreeth, like a garment to the bodie, or shooe to the foote, then the bodie Politicke is in quiet, and findeth ease, pleasure and profit'. But when 'a contrarie forme be given to a contrarie manner of people, as when the shooe is too little or too great for the foote, it doth hurt and incumber the convenient use thereof'.<sup>15</sup> The case of the 'Romanes' in particular demonstrates that 'the free people of Nature tyrannized or ruled by one against their wils, were hee never so good, either faile of courage and waxe servile, or never rest untill they either destroy the King & them that would subdue them, or bee destroyed themselves'.<sup>16</sup> Rome, as a nation of freemen, predictably

<sup>9</sup> Bodin, *The Six Bookes of a Common-weale*, p. 703. <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 705.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 719. <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 717.

<sup>13</sup> The text was, however, completed by 1565 and circulated widely in manuscript.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Smith, *The Common-wealth of England By The Honourable Sir. Tho; Smith Knight, Newly Corrected & Amended* (London, 1635), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 34. <sup>16</sup> Ibid.

declined once brought under a princely form of government. Her virtue could simply not survive the inappropriateness of this arrangement.

We see, then, that the political writers who furnished the intellectual background of Shakespeare's age were in fundamental agreement that there was a best regime for any given community, and that it was a matter of moral urgency to identify and institute it. When a commonwealth was governed according to this design, it would be virtuous and great; when it was governed according to any other design, its virtue and grandeur would be diminished. And they also agreed that Roman history provided the definitive proof of this conviction. Shakespeare himself wrote four plays about the Roman experience, following the fortunes of the city from the earliest days of the republic (*Coriolanus*) through to the travails of the late empire (*Titus Andronicus*). He also wrote a lengthy poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, on the famous event that prompted the banishment of the first Roman kings. Scholars have, therefore, understandably expected to find within this oeuvre an intervention in the canonical early modern debate about the 'best state of a commonwealth'. After all, to write Roman history during this period (or to write dramas about it) was *itself* to take a position on this vexed question.<sup>17</sup> Surely Shakespeare must have had a view about the best constitution (either the best absolutely, or at least the best for Rome); surely his Roman works must show us a Rome that is virtuous when governed correctly, and corrupt when governed incorrectly? Yet the striking fact about the Roman plays is that this is not so. The Shakespeare of the Roman plays emerges neither as a nostalgic partisan of the republic, nor as a defender of the imperial *pax romana*. Quite to the contrary, he seems insistently to deny the orthodoxy that different constitutions yield different levels of virtue and greatness. Writing centuries before *Democracy in America*, Shakespeare offers a view of Roman history that dissolves the question of 'the best state of a commonwealth' – not because he believes, like Tocqueville, that there is no choice to be made among the various regimes, but rather because he believes that the choice does not matter.

## II

It should be helpful to begin by following a clue from Shakespeare's poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, which he composed for his patron the earl of

<sup>17</sup> For the political valences of the large number of Roman plays written in English between 1598 and 1608, see George Hunter, 'A Roman Thought: Renaissance Attitudes to History Exemplified in Shakespeare and Jonson', in Brian S. Lee, ed., *An English Miscellany: Presented to W. S. Mackie* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 93–115. The marked increase in the number of such plays reflected the sudden proliferation of English translations of ancient Roman histories, chiefly Plutarch's *Lives* (1579), Tacitus's *Histories* (1591), Tacitus's *Annals* (1598) and Livy's *History* (1600).

Southampton in 1594. Because the poem treats the crime that provoked the fall of the Roman monarchy and the rise of the republic, it has understandably been given pride of place in recent scholarship on Shakespeare's relationship to the republican tradition. One reputable view, put most emphatically by Andrew Hadfield, is that *Lucrece* is a straightforward declaration of republican principles; it is a reproach against the unrestrained lust and cruelty of monarchs, and a paean to the temperance and dignity of self-government.<sup>18</sup> There are, however, several features of the poem that sit uncomfortably with this reading. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the fact that Shakespeare makes no mention in the poem of his story's political consummation: the foundation of the Roman republic. *Lucrece* simply ends by noting that 'The Romans plausibly did give consent / To Tarquin's everlasting banishment' (ll. 1854–5) – it neglects to narrate the establishment of the consular office.<sup>19</sup> This would be an astonishing omission if Shakespeare had truly intended the poem as a triumphal aetiology of the *vivere civile*. Indeed, the fact that the 'Argument' that prefaces the poem in the 1594 Quarto, unlike the poem itself, describes how 'the Tarquins were all exiled and the state government changed from kings to consuls' has been seen by some as good evidence that Shakespeare did not compose the Argument.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the republican reading is

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 130–53. An earlier approximation of Hadfield's republican reading of the poem (and *Titus Andronicus*) can be found in Clifford Chalmers Huffman, *Coriolanus in Context* (Lewisburg, 1971). See also Michael Platt, *Rome and Romans According to Shakespeare*, rev. edn (New York, 1983), esp. pp. 13–43; Platt, 'The Rape of Lucrece and the Republic for Which It Stands', *Centennial Review*, 19 (1975), 59–79; and Annabel Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines* (London, 1993), pp. 297–312.

<sup>19</sup> It is perhaps worth stating at the outset that this chapter assumes that Shakespeare himself was the author of the works discussed, and that he regarded himself, in Lukas Erne's terms, as a 'literary dramatist' – that is, he paid close attention to the literary form of his dramatic output. See Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge, 2003). The only exception is *Titus Andronicus*, which Shakespeare may have written with the collaboration of George Peele (although the dominant view among contemporary Shakespeareans is that he did not; see, for example, Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Alan Hughes (Cambridge, 1994), esp. pp. 10–12).

<sup>20</sup> See James M. Tolbert, 'The Argument of Shakespeare's *Lucrece*: Its Sources and Authorship', *The University of Texas Studies in English*, 29 (1950), 77–90. Tolbert notes several discrepancies between the Argument and the poem, and argues that whoever wrote the former was probably paraphrasing a Latin epitome of Livy. He also notes that the inclusion of the Argument in the 1594 Quarto appears to have been an afterthought, since 'we know that the Argument was printed after the poem was set in type'. Others, however, have contended that the question remains open. See, for example, Catherine Belsey, 'Tarquin Dispossessed: Expropriation and Consent in *The Rape of Lucrece*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 52 (2001), 320–1. One argument often made against Shakespeare's authorship is clearly mistaken, namely that since Shakespeare describes *Lucrece* in the dedication as 'this pamphlet without beginning', he himself could not have provided a prologue. But, as the Norton editors point out, Shakespeare's description almost certainly refers to the fact that the poem begins *in medias res*: see *The Norton Shakespeare*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus, 2nd edn (New York, 2008), p. 669 n. 2; the Argument appears on pp. 669–70 of this edition.

further complicated by the poem's characterisation of Lucrece's own political allegiances. She is no republican. Her posture, when pleading with Tarquin to spare her from outrage, is that of a committed monarchist. She begins from the premise that 'kings like gods should govern everything' (l. 602); her complaint to Tarquin is that, in his current course of action, 'thou seem'st not what thou art, a god, a king' (l. 601). She chides him for adopting Machiavelli's advice to be 'only loved for fear' precisely because 'happy monarchs still are feared for love' (ll. 610–11).<sup>21</sup> And her final argument is that Tarquin should desist because 'princes are the glass, the school, the book / Where subjects' eyes do learn, do read, do look' (ll. 615–16). Lucrece, in short, does not regard Tarquin as a *representative* of the monarchical tradition, but rather as a *transgressor* against it. As she puts it, 'I sue for exiled majesty's repeal' (l. 640), not for its banishment.<sup>22</sup>

All of this could, of course, be dismissed as a strategic ploy; Lucrece, after all, is pleading with a prince, and at such times, one might suppose, a little monarchism goes a long way. Moreover, even if we were to regard Lucrece herself as a genuine monarchist, we would rightly resist the notion that the position of any single character in the poem ought naively to be equated with the author's own. But, for all this uncertainty, there is nonetheless one respect in which Lucrece's posture incontrovertibly undermines the republican reading of the poem – and here we reach the clue to which I alluded at the outset. After the rape, Lucrece, dreading what will happen when morning comes and Tarquin's deed is revealed to the world, bemoans her fate in the following lines:

The nurse, to still her child, will tell my story,  
And fright her crying babe with Tarquin's name;  
The orator, to deck his oratory,  
Will couple my reproach to Tarquin's shame. (ll. 813–19)<sup>23</sup>

The key feature about this passage is its tone of regret. Lucrece dreads the break of day because she recognises that she is about to become a byword. The interesting turn of phrase for our purposes is the claim that 'the orator, to deck his oratory' will use her story to attack the monarchy. Lucrece's prophecy here seems to operate on two levels. The first level is

<sup>21</sup> Machiavelli famously argues in ch. XVII of *The Prince* that 'if one has to choose, it is much safer to be feared than to be loved' (*risulta molto più sicuro, dovendo scegliere, esser temuti piuttosto che amati*). See Machiavelli, *Il principe*, ed. Pietro Melograni (Milan, 1991), p. 161.

<sup>22</sup> On this see Ian Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucrece* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 115–17.

<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that this passage is entirely Shakespeare's invention – it has no analogue in his two principal classical sources (Livy I. 57–60; Ovid, *Fasti* II. 721–852). For Shakespeare's use of these texts and others see T. W. Baldwin, *On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Poems & Sonnets* (Urbana, Ill., 1959), pp. 98–153.

the more explicit: she looks proleptically toward the end of the poem, after her suicide, when Brutus will seize on her tragedy to advance his own political agenda in what the Argument calls his 'bitter invective against the Tyranny of the King'. 'By all our country rights in Rome maintained', he cries, 'And by chaste Lucrece' soul that late complained / Her wrong to us', he urges a republican revolt. In other words, Lucrece is predicting the ideological use of her misfortune by Junius Brutus, and the political consequences of that use. But it does not seem unreasonable to add to this first level of meaning a second; the passage, after all, does not appear to refer only to one single act – one single oration – but, rather, to the formation of a rhetorical commonplace. Lucrece is predicting (correctly) that her rape will become a standard part of the republican arsenal, that it will be deployed repeatedly for persuasive purposes. She is lamenting her absorption into a strand of political propaganda – one with which, as the reader has been made aware, she herself does not sympathise.<sup>24</sup>

There is, in short, a palpable tension in the poem between Lucrece's own political allegiances and the political use to which her story is put. Shakespeare's cultivation of this dissonance has the effect of precluding a naive reading of the poem's political sensibilities. Just as the sheer brutality of Tarquin undermines Lucrece's pious monarchism, Brutus's opportunistic use of her tragedy taints his republicanism. Similar devices are on display throughout Shakespeare's Roman plays: he routinely forces his reader into a posture of sceptical detachment from the allegiances on offer, either by emphasising the disingenuousness of the speaker or by constructing events so that they stand in a self-evidently dissonant relation to the speaker's convictions. The reason, I want to suggest, is that Shakespeare himself is highly dubious that constitutional form matters much at all, either for Rome or for any other commonwealth. Consider the manner in which Brutus is introduced to the reader at the end of the poem. We are told that, after seeing Lucrece's wound, he puts aside 'his folly's show' – the pretence of stupidity that he had adopted for strategic purposes. Shakespeare then adds the following observation: 'He with the Romans was esteemèd so / As silly jeering idiots are with kings, For sportive words and utt'ring foolish things' (l. 1811).<sup>25</sup> The striking fact

<sup>24</sup> Oliver Arnold's recent book reaches a similar conclusion for rather different reasons: see Arnold, *The Third Citizen: Shakespeare's Theater and the Early Modern House of Commons* (Baltimore, 2007), pp. 101–39. The book was published while this volume was already under consideration with Cambridge University Press, so I was unable to take full account of its arguments.

<sup>25</sup> This too is absent from Shakespeare's sources. Livy, for example, simply writes of Brutus's speech that 'ibi oratio habita nequaquam eius pectoris ingeniique quod simulatum ad eam diem fuerat'. Livy I. 59. 8–9.

about this description is the precise parallel it draws between princes and peoples. They both value 'silly jeering idiots' and the foolishness they spout; scorn for the wise and the embrace of fools is, for Shakespeare, a problem about rulership itself, not about one *kind* of rulership or another. In Shakespeare's darkly radical portrait of the political world, the only thing that seems to distinguish one regime from another is the relatively unglamorous matter of whose ambitions are served.

## III

This posture of Shakespeare's emerges perhaps most clearly from the first and most neglected of his Roman plays, *Titus Andronicus*, which first appeared in print in the same year as *The Rape of Lucrece*. The plot of *Titus*, which is set in the late imperial period,<sup>26</sup> is almost wholly Shakespeare's own invention, and for that reason it comments less directly than his later efforts on the historical experience of republican decline.<sup>27</sup> But scholars have nonetheless seen amidst the general grotesquery of *Titus* a further indication of Shakespeare's republican sensibilities. The play opens with what appears to be an election of sorts; the emperor has died, and the various contenders for his office present their case to the public.<sup>28</sup> The first speech is given to the heir apparent, 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

<sup>26</sup> T. J. B. Spencer disputes this, arguing instead that the play 'cannot be placed at any known period in Roman history' and that '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': Spencer, 'Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans', *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), 27–38 (esp. 32). It seems to me, however, that the play clearly assumes the structure of imperial Rome (during which the Senate and tribunate continued to exist), and is set during the late fourth century (and foreshadows Rome's approaching destruction by the Goths). Here I agree with Katharine Eisaman Maus, 'Titus Andronicus', in *The Norton Shakespeare*, eds. Greenblatt *et al.*, p. 403.

<sup>27</sup> It has been claimed that an eighteenth-century prose work, *The History of Titus Andronicus*, was a late version of Shakespeare's initial source text – but the question remains open. The first statement of this position was R. Sargent, 'The Source of *Titus Andronicus*', *Studies in Philology*, 46 (1949), 167–83.

<sup>28</sup> If, as we suppose *Titus* was composed during 1593–4, this scene would have had a very particular contemporary resonance. The uncertain English succession was a subject of intense debate; it was, for example, in this year that Peter Wentworth once again found himself imprisoned in the Tower for raising the issue of the succession in Parliament. I am grateful to Paulina Kewes for prompting me to focus on this point.

That ware 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)

Next Bassianus, the emperor's second son, speaks:

Romans, friends, followers, and favourers of my right,  
If ever Bassianus, Caesar's son,  
Were gracious in the eyes of royal Rome,  
Keep then this passage to the Capitol,  
And suffer not dishonor to approach  
The imperial seat, to virtue consecrate,  
To justice, continence, and nobility;  
But let desert in pure election shine,  
And, Romans, fight for freedom in your choice. (I. I. 10–17)

Lastly, Marcus, brother of Titus and tribune of the plebs, addresses the crowd and the other candidates:

Princes, that strive by factions and by friends  
Ambitiously for rule and empery,  
Know that the people of Rome, for whom we stand  
A special party, have, by common voice,  
In election for the Roman empery,  
Chosen Andronicus, surnamed Pius  
For many good and great deserts to Rome:  
A nobler man, a braver warrior,  
Lives not this day within the city walls:  
... And now at last, laden with honour's spoils,  
Returns the good Andronicus to Rome,  
Renowned Titus, flourishing in arms.  
Let us entreat, by honour of his name,  
Whom worthily you would have now succeeded,  
And in the Capitol and senate's right,  
Whom you pretend to honour and adore,  
That you withdraw you and abate your strength;  
Dismiss your followers and, as suitors should,  
Plead your deserts in peace and humbleness. (I. I. 18–45)

With that, Saturninus and Bassianus agree to disband their followers, and the crown is ultimately offered to Titus – who disastrously declines it in favour of Saturninus.

There is quite a lot to be said about this exchange, but it is perhaps best to begin by noting the implausibility of the view that it displays a republican commitment on Shakespeare's part. Turning once again to Hadfield's admirable recent book, we find the claim that in this scene

Bassianus stands for 'the ideals of the republic', while Saturninus represents corruption and 'the autocratic drift of Roman society'. The tragedy of *Titus* is, then, the failure of the people (and later of Titus himself) to endorse the humanist piety that virtue, not birth, is the only just claim to political authority, and to embrace the 'freedom' that Bassianus promises. The play should therefore be seen as a 'republican morality tale' which makes the case that 'a more constitutional form of government, which relies on greater participation from a wider political class than is currently involved in making decisions, would be of benefit to any regime'.<sup>29</sup>

There are, it seems to me, several problems with this view. The first and most important is that it fails to notice the evident self-interestedness of the three arguments presented in the opening scene. We are not being invited to meditate in abstract terms on the respective merits of birth, virtue and military prowess as claims to political authority.<sup>30</sup> We are, rather, being asked to recognise that it is not accidental that we hear the argument for primogeniture from an eldest son, the argument for virtue from a younger son with no military record, and the argument for military prowess from the brother of Rome's victorious general. How interesting, Shakespeare seems to be saying, that each of the three men emerges with precisely the political ideology that best advances his own bid for rulership.<sup>31</sup> The instrumental and disingenuous character of Bassianus's republican rhetoric is further suggested by the fact that, like Saturninus, he has come to the forum armed. This is, *pace* Hadfield, no 'free election', but rather a military manoeuvre. Marcus asks the two brothers, who are 'striving by factions and by friends', to 'withdraw you and abate your strength' – that is, to dismiss their armed bands, who have come with them to the Capitol, as Shakespeare tells us, 'with drum and colours' in the manner of armies. Indeed, despite their pose as supplicants, both Saturninus and Bassianus are evidently unwilling in the first instance to entrust their cause to 'the people's favour' (l. 54). Marcus says as much when he asks the two to retire in the name of 'the Capitol and Senate's right, / Whom you pretend to honour and adore', and to behave as true 'suitsors' of the

<sup>29</sup> Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, p. 165. See also Huffman, *Coriolanus in Context*, pp. 42–4.

<sup>30</sup> It is also worth pointing out that one could certainly endorse the humanist piety that *virtus vera nobilitas est* without being any sort of 'republican' in Hadfield's sense.

<sup>31</sup> This recalls an observation offered by Blair Worden in response to E. M. W. Tillyard. Acknowledging that Shakespeare's kings frequently argue for 'unhesitating obedience to God's anointed rulers', Worden notes, 'but then they would, wouldn't they?' See Worden, 'Shakespeare and Politics', *Shakespeare Survey*, 44 (1992), 3.

public trust. In short, Bassianus's words do not match his actions (he is, after all, seeking a *throne*), and the resulting dissonance taints his republicanism, just as Brutus's opportunism undermined his own rhetoric in *Lucrece*. Republicanism appears in *Titus* not as the author's preferred constitutional position, but rather as yet another device for the advancement of personal ambition.

There is, however, a second, more basic difficulty involved in reading this scene, and the tragedy which develops out of it, as an endorsement of republicanism over monarchy – namely the fact that Shakespeare's portrait of Rome in *Titus* appears to collapse the distinction between republic and empire altogether. The mob still rules in Titus's imperial Rome, just as it did in earlier days (and just as Shakespeare would show it ruling in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*),<sup>32</sup> and the mob is every bit as easily manipulated. Octavian's conviction in *Antony and Cleopatra* that the 'common body, / Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream, / Goes to, and back, lackeying the varying tide, / To rot itself with motion' (I. 4. 44–7) applies equally powerfully to the Roman populace of the late empire, as Shakespeare envisions it. No one recognises this better than Titus himself, who bemoans the fact that he 'threw the people's suffrages' on to the very same Saturninus who now 'doth tyrannise' over him (4. 3. 18–19). That is, he recognises that it was he himself who engineered his tormentor's rise to power, not any 'pure election', and that the fundamental source of power in the city remains 'the people's suffrages'. Both republican politics and its opposite, in other words, amount to the skilled direction of the mob by ambitious men – only the names have changed. Moreover, as in the republic, many of the central players in this game of manipulation are tribunes, popular magistrates who, as it turns out, exhibit all of the same vices as Saturninus and the Tarquins. Indeed, when one considers the extreme depravity exhibited by Saturninus, Tamora, her sons and her slave lover Aaron, it is surely a significant fact that perhaps the most pathos-filled speech in the entire play is directed not at them but rather at the cruel, unfeeling tribunes. At the start of Act 3, Titus pleads in vain for the lives of his 'condemned sons', who have been unjustly accused of murder. The tribunes ignore him and leave the stage, but he continues

<sup>32</sup> Anne Barton argues that Shakespeare's portrayal of the mob is more admiring in *Coriolanus* than it is in any of the earlier plays. In particular, she claims that here Shakespeare allows his citizens to think on their own. Yet it is hard to deny that they remain firmly under the control of the tribunes. See Anne Barton, 'Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', in Catherine Alexander, ed., *Shakespeare and Politics* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 70–2.

to address them as if they were still present. His remaining son, Lucius, interjects, 'O noble father, you lament in vain. The Tribunes hear you not. No man is by, / And you recount your sorrows to a stone' (3. 1. 27). The dialogue proceeds as follows:

TITUS: Ah Lucius, for thy brothers let me plead.  
 Grave Tribunes, once more I entreat of you –  
 LUCIUS: My gracious lord, no tribune hears you speak.  
 TITUS: Why, tis no matter, man; if they did hear,  
 They would not mark me, or if they did mark,  
 They would not pity me, yet plead I must;  
 Therefore I tell my sorrows to the stones;  
 Who, though they cannot answer my distress,  
 Yet in some sort they are better than the tribunes,  
 For that they will not intercept my tale:  
 When I do weep, they humbly at my feet  
 Receive my tears and seem to weep with me;  
 And, were they but attired in grave weeds,  
 Rome could afford no tribune like to these.  
 A stone is soft as wax, – tribunes more hard than stones;  
 A stone is silent, and offendeth not,  
 And tribunes with their tongues doom men to death.  
 (3. 1. 30–46)

The tribunes, paradigmatic republican magistrates, are here compared unfavourably to stones; their cruelty and hard-heartedness are worthy of Saturninus and, for that matter, of Tamora, who likewise relates to Lavinia's tears as 'unrelenting flint to drops of rain' (2. 2. 141). The description also immediately calls to mind Shakespeare's characterisation of the tyrant Angelo from *Measure for Measure*, written ten years later. Angelo 'scarce confesses / That his blood flows; or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone' (1. 4. 51–3); he is 'a marble to [Mariana's] tears, / is washed with them, but relents not' (3. 1. 229–30). It is not that tribunes are worse than kings; it is, rather, that power brings vice, no matter the constitutional arrangement. As the virtuous servant puts it in *Timon of Athens*, 'The devil knew not what he did when he made man politic' (3. 3. 27–8).

## IV

This meditation on the kingly vices of tribunes becomes even more pronounced in Shakespeare's last Roman play, *Coriolanus* (1608).<sup>33</sup> Indeed,

<sup>33</sup> *Cymbeline* (probably composed in 1610–11) is set during Roman times, but does not take place in Rome and so does not treat the Roman constitution.

the institution of the tribunate following the secession of the plebs in 494 BCE furnishes the occasion for the tragedy (although it must be said that Shakespeare conflates this insurrection with the corn riots that occurred three years later).<sup>34</sup> In the very first scene, the proud Coriolanus announces that, following their sedition, the plebs have been granted 'five tribunes to defend their vulgar wisdoms' and prophesies that this magistracy will in time 'win upon power and throw forth greater themes / For insurrection's arguing' (1. 1. 212–13). The collision of the 'absolute' and domineering patrician ethos of Coriolanus with the desire for liberty among the plebs constitutes the central thematic axis of the play, and I cannot hope to do it justice here. I only want to point out that Shakespeare goes to considerable lengths to assign to his tribunes all of the pride and Machiavellian caprice that we associate with Saturninus, Richard III and Shakespeare's other royal villains. Here again, I would suggest, we confront Shakespeare's deep scepticism that there is anything fundamental separating different political regimes.

In this connection, it is first of all worth noting that the more prominent of the two tribunes in the play is given the name Junius Brutus – that is, the name of the revolutionary founder of the Roman republic, and the author of the 'bitter' and calculating invective that appears at the end of *The Rape of Lucrece*. Shakespeare does have a classical warrant for this gesture: Plutarch's life of Coriolanus identifies the first two tribunes as Junius Brutus and Sicinius Vellutus,<sup>35</sup> a detail he seems to have taken from Dionysius of Halicarnassus (it is not attested in any other source).<sup>36</sup> And it was well known that the revolutionary Brutus was a patrician and first consul of the republic, while tribunes were representatives of the plebs; as a result, the audience would probably not have been confused between the two. But the force of the gesture is undeniable all the same. The great villain of the play, who ejects Coriolanus from Rome, is associated with the conniving figure who ejects Tarquin from the city in Shakespeare's poem (the two events, it is worth noting, are only separated by fifteen years). The association becomes even more pronounced if we recall that 'Junius Brutus' was also the pseudonym of the author of the famous monarchomach pamphlet, *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* (1579).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 49–51. The episode is recounted in Livy II. 32; Plutarch, *Coriolanus* 6; and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* VI. 86.

<sup>35</sup> Plutarch, *Coriolanus* 7. <sup>36</sup> Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* VI. 89.

<sup>37</sup> Authorship of the pamphlet has been much disputed, but the scholarly consensus now regards the work as a collaborative effort undertaken by Hubert Languet and Philippe du Plessis Mornay. See *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, ed. and trans. George Garnett (Cambridge, 1994), pp. lv–lxxvi.



Once again, Shakespeare does not mean to deny the obvious faults of Tarquin, or even of Coriolanus, whose pride makes him unable to 'temporize' with objectionable circumstances (4. 6. 17), and who regards the city as an instrument of his own personal glorification and advancement. The point, rather, is that in each case the ejector is every bit as ambitious and self-interested as the ejectee.

Shakespeare dramatises this most extensively in the lengthy dialogue between Menenius (the moderate patrician who resolves the secession of the plebs) and the two tribunes at the beginning of Act 2 – a scene that has no analogue in Plutarch and is wholly Shakespeare's invention.<sup>38</sup> Brutus and Sicinius begin by lambasting the prideful conduct of Coriolanus, who wishes for the 'throne' that he views as his right. Menenius counters as follows: 'You talk of pride: O that you could turn your eyes toward the napes of your necks, and make but an interior survey of your good selves! O that you could!' (2. 1. 34–7). When the two tribunes respond by asking, 'What then, sir?', Menenius answers: 'Why, then you should discover a brace of unmeriting, / proud, violent, testy magistrates, alias / fools, as any in Rome' (2. 1. 34–44). The tribunes, who correctly detect pride in the figure of Coriolanus, stand accused of precisely the same vice. They are 'violent' and 'testy'; they are indeed 'fools', a description that calls to mind Shakespeare's observation in *The Rape of Lucrece* that both kings and peoples esteem 'silly jeering idiots' who 'utter foolish things'. Such behaviour, Shakespeare reminds us, is what endeared the first Junius Brutus to the mob.

Menenius continues by identifying the tribunes as 'wealsmen', that is partisans of the republic, although he hastens to add that they are no 'Lycurguses' (2. 1. 55). There are, he acknowledges, those who say that Brutus and Sicinius are 'reverend, grave men', but Menenius insists that this is not the case. He continues with an unrestrained polemic against the capricious, dilatory and selfish conduct of republican magistrates:

You know neither me, yourselves nor any thing. You are ambitious for poor knaves' caps and legs: you wear out a good wholesome forenoon in hearing a cause between an orange wife and a fosset-seller; and then rejoin the controversy of three pence to a second day of audience. When you are hearing a matter between party and party, if you chance to be pinched with the colic, you make faces like mummers; set up the bloody flag against all patience; and, in roaring for a chamber-pot, dismiss the controversy bleeding, the more entangled by your

<sup>38</sup> Paul Cantor notes this fact: see Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* (Ithaca, 1976), p. 41.

hearing: all the peace you make in their cause is, calling both the parties knaves. You are a pair of strange ones. (2. 1. 67–79)

On this account, the tribunes are low and callous, prideful and supremely self-interested. They hunger for recognition just like Coriolanus – they are 'ambitious for poor knaves' caps and legs', that is, for doffed caps and genuflection. They dismiss serious proceedings if they feel the slightest personal discomfort. They are, as Titus would have put it, 'more hard than stones'.

But they are also calculating and cynical, making use of all the machinations of tyrants. Their true preoccupation is not freedom, but power: their worry about Coriolanus, as they make clear in Act II, is that their 'office may, / During his power, go sleep' (2. 1. 220). He must be destroyed, they agree, 'or our authority's for an end' (2. 1. 243). They resolve, accordingly, on a scheme to provoke both Coriolanus and the plebs into fiery confrontation. They will tell their constituents that Coriolanus means to enslave them, 'holding them, / In human action and capacity, / Of no more soul nor fitness for the world / Than camels'. They will warn of 'dispropertied' freedoms, and call their foe 'a traitorous innovator, / A foe to th'public weal' (3. 1. 172–3). In other words, they know very well how to speak 'republican'. When the plebs react with anger to this strident rhetoric and confront Coriolanus, his pride will burst forth and ignite the blaze:

This (as you say) suggested  
At some time when his soaring insolence  
Shall touch the people – which time shall not want,  
If he be put upon't, and that's as easy  
As to set dogs on sheep – will be his fire  
To kindle their dry stubble; and their blaze  
Shall darken him for ever. (2. 1. 252–57)

Yet they themselves do not wish to be identified as the authors of the 'mutiny'; they are both too cowardly and too clever for that. Rather, they urge their followers to tell Coriolanus that they had actually urged his case, lecturing the plebs on 'How youngly he began to serve his country, / How long continued, and what stock he springs of' (2. 3. 234–5).

They hatch their scheme in due course, and Coriolanus promptly walks into their trap. He throws a tantrum and publicly urges the repeal of the tribunate. Sensing their opportunity, Brutus and Sicinius pounce. They conspire to assemble an angry mob which is programmed to accept by acclamation any decision the tribunes reach on the fate of Coriolanus; and they further instruct their aedile minions to keep the commotion

going so that the sentence can be executed instantly, without any opportunity for recourse or review:

SICINIUS: Assemble presently the people hither;  
And when they hear me say 'It shall be so  
I'the right and strength o'the commons,' be it either  
For death, for fine, or banishment, then let them  
If I say fine, cry 'Fine;' if death, cry 'Death'.  
Insisting on the old prerogative  
And power i'the truth o'the cause.

AEDILE: I shall inform them.

BRUTUS: And when such time they have begun to cry,  
Let them not cease, but with a din confused  
Enforce the present execution  
Of what we chance to sentence.

AEDILE: Very well.

SICINIUS: Make them be strong and ready for this hint,  
When we shall hap to give't them. (3. 3. 12-24)

Having procured the exile of Coriolanus with their little scheme, the tribunes, like good Machiavellians, recognise the need to shift tactics: 'Now we have shown our power, / Let us seem humbler after it is done / Than when it was a-doing' (4. 2. 4-6).

## v

Brutus and Sicinius rule Rome by manipulating the mob, just as Titus did (and just as Antony would in *Julius Caesar*). Indeed, the obvious similarities between Shakespeare's portrayal of Roman politics in *Coriolanus* and his portrayal in *Titus Andronicus* are deeply significant. The former play, after all, takes place at the very beginning of Roman republican history, while the latter takes place at the end of the imperial period. A standard view of the relation between them is, unsurprisingly, that *Coriolanus* displays an uncorrupt Rome, while *Titus* shows a degenerate Rome still reeling from the moral consequences of republican collapse.<sup>39</sup> This view casts Shakespeare as an altogether more conventional Renaissance figure, one who uses the dramatisation of Roman history to defend a particular view of the *optimus reipublicae status* – namely, that virtue cannot survive in the absence of republican government. Yet, as we have seen, this may well be too hasty. The titles have surely changed, but politics, Shakespeare seems to be saying, is politics.

<sup>39</sup> This is Cantor's view: Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire*. See also Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, pp. 155-6.

The tribunes in *Coriolanus* use force and fraud to preserve their power, masking their pursuit of private interest with high-sounding speeches about freedoms and civic rights. In this they strongly resemble the figure of Junius Brutus in *The Rape of Lucrece* and call to mind the self-interested deployment of political rhetoric in *Titus*. But they are certainly not the only ones, and that is, after all, the central claim I want to make. The portrayal of the tribunes in Shakespeare's Roman plays is not 'anti-republican' any more than the portrayal of Saturninus, Richard III, Macbeth or Angelo – or, indeed, of Julius Caesar – is 'anti-monarchical'.<sup>40</sup> Shakespeare's concern is with power and its consequences. His fundamental conviction is that the pursuit of personal ambition, and the preparedness to use all means necessary to preserve the power we have amassed, is a great human constant. It organises the political sphere in every regime, which suggests that the whole question of the best regime is a red herring. Political ideology, on this account, is not concerned with value, but with interest. It provides a patina of legitimacy for actions that would otherwise be clear for what they are: naked attempts to advance the interests of specific political actors. This is not, of course, to suggest that Shakespeare denies the possibility of genuine virtue. Indeed, for every Tamora in Shakespeare's world there is a Lucrece; for every Tarquin there is a Menenius. What Shakespeare seems to dispute is that the level of virtue in a particular commonwealth depends on the *status reipublicae*. Republicanism, as it appears in the Roman plays, is neither better nor worse than its ideological rivals. It is, on the contrary, just more of the same.

It is only from this perspective, it seems to me, that we can appreciate the true poignancy of Shakespeare's portrayal of Marcus Brutus in *Julius Caesar*. Brutus is undoubtedly Shakespeare's great republican hero,<sup>41</sup> but it is worth paying attention to the precise *reason* for which Shakespeare admires him. Consider Antony's famous speech at the play's conclusion:

This was the noblest Roman of them all:  
All the conspirators save only he  
Did that they did in envy of great Caesar;  
He only, in a general honest thought  
And common good to all, made one of them.  
His life was gentle, and the elements

<sup>40</sup> See the wise comment on this point in Robert Miola, 'Julius Caesar and the Tyrannicide Debate', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 38 (1985), 271-89 (esp. 288).

<sup>41</sup> George Hunter observed that Shakespeare casts Brutus as the embodiment of 'the ethical splendours of Romanitas'. See Hunter, 'A Roman Thought', 107.

So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up  
And say to all the world 'This was a man!' (5. 5. 67-74)

Brutus is unique, not because he is right, but because he is 'noble'. When Cassius prates on about slavery and invokes the memory of the first Brutus 'that would have brooked / Th'eternal devil to keep his state in Rome / As easily as a king' (1. 2. 160-1), Shakespeare reminds us that it is 'envy' talking.<sup>42</sup> This reference to Junius Brutus is, then, deliciously ironic, since it is Cassius, not Marcus Brutus, who is truly cut from the same cloth as the coup leader in *The Rape of Lucrece*. It is Cassius who drapes personal ambition in the lofty garb of republican rhetoric. Brutus, on the other hand, is unique because he does not do so. He acts, rather, out of 'a general honest thought / And common good to all'. What distinguishes Brutus is his honorable commitment to act in the service of true principles. But his tragedy is that the principles for which he acts are no more true or false than any other. He is nostalgic for a Rome that never existed and is martyred for a regime that does not save.

<sup>42</sup> For Shakespeare's relentlessly negative characterisation of Cassius's motives, see Miola, 'Julius Caesar and the Tyrannicide Debate', 277.