



Shakespeare and Rome

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I should have loved to call this paper: Shakespeare in Rome. Any Shakespeare scholar would give a lot (perhaps short of tenure or release time) to be able to place Shakespeare in Rome since Rome played such a prominent role in his *oeuvre*. But, alas, from all the consequential evidence that we have, Shakespeare never visited Rome, or Italy.

And yet a cursory review of his plays shows that nearly a third (12 to be more exact) are set in Italy. These are among his most well-known and beloved works: early and middle comedies like *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew* (Padua), *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing* (Sicily) and tragedies like of course *Romeo and Juliet* (Verona and Mantua) *Othello* (Venice), and the Roman plays themselves from the early *Titus Andronicus* to *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*. Antony and Cleopatra though considered a Roman play essentially takes place in Egypt and his late Romances *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* include scenes in Rome and Italy, and context of *The Tempest* derives from Prospero's exile from Milan. Not to make a too fine point, though we acknowledge Shakespeare's geographical range emanating literally from his sparse rented room accommodations in London yet encompassing the world from France to Bohemia to Athens to Denmark. to Bermuda, to Scotland, even suggestions to Palestine; yet from his earliest *Titus* to his final *Tempest*, Shakespeare's imagination was imbued with thoughts of Italy.

Renaissance scholars do not see this to be a conundrum. The Italian influence on science, art, literature, and overall culture, occurred in the country that all agree can be credited with birthing the Renaissance. I won't overdo the name dropping, from Boccaccio, to Leonardo to Machiavelli to Michelangelo to Giordano Bruno and Galileo, individuals who have achieved iconic status. Italy was the fulcrum of the secular movement, which included Christian Humanism, and radiated through all the states of Europe in the sixteenth century. England was susceptible to this influence and built upon it to create the English Renaissance which was so mighty and great but beyond the province of this paper.

My paper will focus on the most specific influence of Rome on Shakespeare in the fields of culture and politics. In keeping with the theme of this conference relating to exploring progressive, social and economic issues, I shall argue that before the advent of the sciences of economics and sociology, Shakespeare and in fact his contemporaries were addressing such issues in setting their plays in the locus of Italy--far from England where censorship would have impeded open discussion of these issue--for example the



question of monarchy as opposed to the Republic. Michael Platt in his *Rome and Romans According to Shakespeare*, has observed: "Strictly speaking, for Shakespeare, Rome means the Republic for when he wishes to indicate the period that he calls the empire, when the executive, legislative and popular powers which had been distinct in the Republic were united (or swallowed) in one man, then he adds the word "Empire" and its cognates to the word 'Rome'."

I would suggest that perhaps the most significant aesthetic of the Renaissance was the Socratic dictum enunciated by Plato regarding "the unexamined life not worth living," an ambiguous way of suggesting that the examined life was the worthwhile life. This idea surely links the major authors and thinkers throughout this epoch of European history.

Shakespeare's works are as much a celebration of the power of thought (instituted by the Renaissance and essentially continuing unimpeded down to our own day with shattering discoveries in physics, economics and sociology); but as well than the ethereal summit of poetry, the unified sensibility so meaningfully referenced by T.S. Eliot. As with the previously mentioned authors, all Renaissance humanists, Shakespeare's literature mainly explores the great moral, ethical and political issues of the age. But that is only the half. I would argue that Shakespeare readily devotes each of his plays to some facet of "the examined life" which are the moral characteristic of the human condition. As you well recognize such dominant themes of the struggle for power, revenge, ambition, lust, social classification, jealousy, revenge seeking to dramatize and understand, "the invention of the human," as Harold Bloom would have it, civilizations and its discontents as Freud would describe theme later on. along with his fellow humanists like Machiavelli, Rabelais, Sir Thomas More, Montaigne, Ben Jonson and including his social superior Francis Bacon.

There are two additional points to be made. It was no accident that the Latin language was *lingua franca* of Europe supported by the classical influence that was derived in the first place from Greece, but in fact was mediated by the Latin authors who ushered in the Renaissance and spread to the rest of Europe. The dominance of the Latin language from medieval times to the modern world cannot be overestimated.

In short, the Roman influence that was the more dominant in England. Recall Ben Jonson's snide condescending reference to Shakespeare's "little Latin, less Greek." This can be explained by the dominance of the Latin influence particularly in the world of politics. Rome survived in the Elizabethan Age, as Platt argued as a beacon of republicanism.

That brings me to the main point that I want to make in this presentation. I shall suggest that in his Roman plays, Shakespeare was able to present the dominant political views, the struggle between central authority, which I termed the royal king and the rights of the people in the commonwealth, a subject that personally takes me back nearly fifty



years to my scholarly research for my doctoral dissertation to the conflict between the monarch's prerogatives and the rights due to his subjects. It is pleasant to revisit this as it is to embrace this historical city.

All of us recall the views expressed by Brutus in Julius Caesar as the rationale for assassinating Caesar, exhorting the mob, in Ciceronian oratory (what great prose to deliver here in Rome):

Be patient until the last. Romans, countryman and lovers, hear me for my cause, and be silent that you may hear. Believe me for mine honor, and have respect for mine honor that you may believe. Censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses that you may the better judge. If there is any in this assembly, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say, that Brutus' love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: Not that I lov'd Caesar less, but that I lov'd Rome more. Had you rather that Caesar were living and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all freemen? As Caesar lov'd me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honor him, but as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love; joy for his fortune; honor for his valor; and death for his ambition. Who is here so base that would be a bondman? If any, speak, for him I have offended. Who is here so rude that would not be a Roman? If any speak, for him I have offended. Who is here so vile that would not love his country? If any speak, for him have I offended. I pause for a reply.

Eloquence, Freudian projection, sophism, hypocrisy, insincerity, Machiavellianism, sublime oratory, high poetry--all of the above. Reflecting Honor, patriotism, duty, respect--the precise virtues signified in the speech were the central code of Elizabethan England. No surprise since they were adopted by England and in fact all of western society

But the ambiguity of the play in representing both sides of the argument between monarchy and subjects' rights underscores what I believe is Shakespeare's own ambivalence, notwithstanding Platt's certitude, which I do not share with him. The play is named for the victim, Julius Caesar. The tragedy that Shakespeare enunciated even in one of his earliest plays, again set in Rome *Titus Andronicus* when the tyrant Bassianus seizes power over the choice of the election/choice of the people and that circumstance brings about great tragedy.

Antony and Cleopatra is about the conflict of power between the two successors of



Caesar's throne. Though I judge it to be more about the conflict between passion and judgment than about politics, since both Antony and Octavius are in conflict over the legacy of Caesar. In John Dryden's adaptation of Shakespeare's play later in the seventeenth century, he would subtitle it, *All for Love, or the World Well Lost*.

But I believe that on the other hand, Coriolanus shows Shakespeare's deep suspicion of the mob, hence of democracy. Coriolanus who had risen from humble origins to the height of the social hierarchy assails the commons, even as the Tribunes in Julius Caesar disparaged the crowd:

*He that would give good words to thee will flatter
Beneath abhorring. What would you have, you curs,
That like not peace nor war? The one affrights you,
The other makes you proud. He that trust to you,
Where he should find you lions, finds you hares;
Where foxes, geese. You are no surer, no,
Than is the coal of fire upon the ice,
Or hailstone in the sun. Your virtue is
To make him worthy whose offense subdues him,
And curse that justice did it. Who deserves greatness
Deserves your hate, and your affections are
A sick man's appetite, who desires most that
Which would increase his evil. He that depends
Upon your favors swims with fins of lead,
And hews down oaks with rushes. Hang ye! Trust ye?
With every minute you do change a mind,
And call him noble that was now your hate;
Him vile, that was your garland. What's the matter,
That in the several places of the city
You cry against the noble Senate, who
(under the gods) keep you in awe, which else
Would feed on one another.*

I have said to my classes over the years that nothing would please me more than to say that Shakespeare was a Jeffersonian democrat, but I can't because Shakespeare was a child of the Renaissance that gave birth to great thought rather than the enlightenment which gave birth to political and social change.

My seasoned view of Shakespeare is that he was an intellectual adventurer--exploring every facet of life and culture. But in his Roman plays, perhaps politics reign supreme.



Shakespeare scholars are in general agreement that in Shakespeare's final work, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare perhaps summarizes his later politics, which I will conclude with.

Gonzalo: *In [my] commonwealth, I would, by contraries,
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate,
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Boundaries, tillage, vineyard, none--No private
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil.
No occupation, all men idle, all
And women too, but innocent and pure,
No sovereignty.*

Sebastian: *Yet he would be king on it.*

Antonio: *The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning.*

Gonzalo: *All things in common should produce
Without sweat, or endeavor: treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,
Of its own kind, all foison (plenty), all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.*

Looking backward to his sources, Thomas More's fantasy *Utopia* and Rabelais' *Abbey of Theleme* and forward to Karl Marx, anarchists like Proudhon Kropotkin, if not Timothy Leary's "Turn on, tune in, Drop Out" seems to come close. I suspect that Shakespeare was world weary at the end of his life.

If he earlier had refused to be identified as a servile puppet of monarchy like his contemporaries such as Francis Bacon and not quite the Jeffersonian Democrat, how to explain what he saying here? Most notably he does give currency to the noble ideal of the commonwealth, which influenced the founding of our own Commonwealths of Massachusetts, Virginia and Pennsylvania and Kentucky. Shakespeare remained thoughtful, if not exactly a social revolutionary until the end of his brilliant career, as he embraced the Anglican religion and the Divine Right of Kings.