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Tragedy and Roman History

Haply you think, but bootless are your thoughts,
That this is fabulously counterfeit
And that we do as all tragedians do:
To die today, for fashioning our scene,
The death of Ajax, or some Roman peer,
And in a minute starting up again
Revive to please tomorrow's audience.

-- Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 4.4.76-82

Standing among the corpses at the end of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo invites his audience to consider his 'fabulously counterfeit' scene. The startling self-consciousness of the lines rehearses both Hieronimo's performance and that of the actor playing him – the one of tragic revenge, the other of a tragic play. For both of them, a quintessentially tragic action is indexed by the gesture towards Roman history. 'Some Roman peer', the formulation surprisingly casual, might almost be any Roman peer, the history of Rome an extended pageant of aristocratic slaughter, a reservoir of monstrosities at once outlandish and familiar.¹

Hieronimo's lines suggest why an understanding of Renaissance English tragedy needs to grasp the deep integration of Rome and its history into early modern intellectual and emotional life. Awareness of Roman matters was not just a habit cultivated by the learned, though it formed the ground of almost all learning. Daniel Woolf argues for the emergence in England across this period of a 'more or less coherent – which does not mean "uncontested" – historical sense of a *national* past', a sense of 'the place of

England, and eventually Britain, within a world history that includes the classical and pre-classical eras.’² To this sense, English history was also a part of Roman history, just as Britannia Magna, ‘Great Britain’, had been a part of the Roman Empire: the first certainly dated event in English history was Julius Caesar’s invasion of 55 BC.³ At the same time, a counter-current sought to distinguish ‘British’ and ‘Roman’ strands in the early tangled history of the two.⁴ For an Elizabethan, Roman history was at once ‘mine own and not mine own’ and it is between these alternatives that its tragic staging plays out.⁵

We can see this mixture of familiarity and strangeness – this ‘uncanny’ Rome, in Freud’s sense⁶ -- even in small encounters. In 1576, the antiquarian chronicler, John Stow, attended an excavation in Spitalfield, northeast of the City of London, where interest was greatly excited by the discovery of a cemetery even older than the twelfth-century priory formerly nearby. In the field, Stow reported:

many earthen pots called *Urnae* were found full of ashes and burnt bones of men, to wit, of the Romans that inhabited here. ... Every of these pots had in them, with the ashes of the dead, one piece of copper money with the inscription of the Emperor then reigning.... Besides those *Urnas*, many other pots were there found made of a white earth, with long necks and handles, like to our stone jugs. I myself have reserved, amongst divers of those antiquities there, one *Urna*, with the ashes and bones, and one pot of white earth very small ... made in shape of a hare squatted

upon her legs, and between her ears is the mouth
of the pot.⁷

Stow displays towards these Roman remains a characteristic mix of wonder and pathos. He goes on to consider whether some nearby skeletons were those of men murdered with the large nails adjacent, a hypothesis joining these old bones with terrible violence. Stow demurs – since ‘a smaller nail would more aptly serve to so bad a purpose, and a more secret place would lightly be employed for their burial’ -- but the debate confirms a certain expectation about antique corpses. For Stow, *Romanitas*, in all its ambivalence, is both immediate and evocative; its residue can be held in a modern hand, a tangible part of English history. It can open its mouth and pour out the past. For him, as for antiquarians like Camden and Speed and also for their readers, the ground underfoot, the landscape around, the coinage in their purses,⁸ the words they spoke, the institutions they lived within were all deeply shaped by a Rome towards which they felt a complex mix of admiration, pity and fear -- the very stuff of tragic emotion.⁹

No audience in Shakespeare’s London could escape Rome. London’s walls, its foundations, and many of its major landmarks were known, or taken, to be Roman. Looking on London’s Tower, the new young King in Shakespeare’s *Richard III* speaks openly of this:

PRINCE EDWARD

Did Julius Caesar build that place, my lord?

BUCKINGHAM

He did, my gracious lord, begin that place,
Which since succeeding ages have re-edified.

PRINCE EDWARD

Is it upon record, or else reported
Successively from age to age, he built it?

BUCKINGHAM

Upon record, my gracious liege.

PRINCE EDWARD

But say, my lord, it were not register'd,
Methinks the truth should live from age to age,
As 'twere retail'd to all posterity
Even to the general all-ending day.

(3.1.69-78)¹⁰

The deeds of Rome provide a framework for modern action and ambition, for the very definition of heroic English enterprise a future history is to record:

PRINCE EDWARD

That Julius Caesar was a famous man:
With what his valour did t'enrich his wit,
His wit set down to make his valour live.
Death makes no conquest of this conqueror,
For now he lives in fame though not in life.
I'll tell you what, my cousin Buckingham.

BUCKINGHAM What, my good lord?

PRINCE EDWARD

An if I live until I be a man,
I'll win our ancient right in France again,
Or die a soldier, as I lived a king.

(3.1.84-93)

For the Elizabethan audience, both the promise and the pathos of the young King are measured in the shadow of Julius Caesar's 'Tower', visible just south of the theatre where these words were spoken.¹¹

Roman history for Elizabethan writers was 'mine own' in another sense too. Histories of Rome and of England had been entangled for many decades, and a dramatist of the end of the century had contact with Roman history both as matter and as manner, directly through the availability of Roman

histories in Latin and in English as potential stage actions, and indirectly through the influence of Roman writing on the content and shaping of English histories themselves.¹² Nor did the influence run only one way, from the printed source to the stage. All through the two plus decades of Shakespeare's career, Roman history, English history and dramatic versions of both engaged in a complex conversation of mutual influence and instruction. To understand Shakespeare's deployment of Roman history in tragedy, it is helpful to be aware of how this conversation had already influenced and been influenced by his work.

A simple instance is again given by *Richard III*. Shakespeare took the main outlines of his narrative from various chronicle histories, especially Holinshed. But those sources themselves had already assimilated the earlier account of Richard by Thomas More, which was in turn shaped by More's reading of Roman history-writing, so that Shakespeare, whether he knew it or not, incorporated aspects of Roman historiography already transmuted into English from generations earlier.

This is a fairly simple case, but relations between prose and dramatic history could also be more complex, as in the case of histories of Henry IV and V. Shakespeare's work on this material stretches over several years and joins a broad contemporary interest in early fifteenth-century English history, where stage histories provided one impetus for the development of English historical prose. John Hayward's history of the reign of King Henry IV, for instance, published in 1599, was influenced in shape and temper by the Roman historian Tacitus. But so too was it by Shakespeare's own earlier work on the subject, with its powerfully-composed

speeches and its sustained and compelling trajectory, which contrasts sharply with the Holinshed's looseness.¹³ Roman history, English history and English historical drama were complexly intertwined in the years before Shakespeare turned directly to staging tragic Rome. Both the appeal and, in some sort, the dangers of these interconnections are epitomized by the Chorus in *Henry V* as he knots together Henry's victories in France, Roman conquest, and Elizabethan imperial politics, to imagine:

...In the quick forge and working-house of thought,
How London doth pour out her citizens.
The mayor and all his brethren, in best sort,
Like to the senators of th'antique Rome
With the plebeians swarming at their heels,
Go forth and fetch their conqu'ring Caesar in --
As, by a lower but high-loving likelihood,
Were now the General of our gracious Empress --
As in good time he may -- from Ireland coming,
Bringing rebellion broachèd on his sword,
How many would the peaceful city quit
To welcome him!

(5.0.23-34)

The tensions in this triangle of relations speak much to the complexity of Roman history for a contemporary audience, not the least element of which is an awareness of the shadow of tragedy alike over Caesar, Henry and, prophetically, Essex.

If such connections show some of the ways in which Roman history for an Elizabethan reader was 'mine own', there are important checks that set it off as in crucial ways 'not mine own.' Chief among these was the stark fact of religious difference: Romans were not Christians. As pagans, the shape of their world, the structure and force of their

beliefs, the bent of their emotional and imaginative commitments, and even the events that could count as historically plausible (the God Hercules abandoning Mark Antony, for instance) were strikingly different. And through such differences, antiquity offered a field of exploration in some ways richer and more plastic than recent, English, Christian history. All the major orientation points through which tragedy was articulated – heroism, love, destiny, sacrifice – look radically different in a pagan world committed to Mars not Christ, Venus not Charity, Fate not Providence, Elysium not Heaven. The culture of antiquity was, in this respect, a rich ‘non-identical twin’ to its converted successor.

And then there was the no less clear fact of the relative remoteness of Roman historical matters from English priorities and investments, despite the fashionable doctrine of the *translatio imperii* which imagined Elizabeth as “our gracious empress”. This is partly a matter of there being no overwhelming and directly active inheritance of any strand of Rome in contemporary life – no Holy *Roman* Empire, no *Roman* Catholicism. That is, as G. K. Hunter put it, there is no envelope of historical destiny that contains both Roman and English experience in one embrace.¹⁴ The ideas, habits and actions of Romans unfold to a greater extent within their own horizon than those of Richard III, whose actions are directly linked to a national order and set of commitments still in contention. Like the disjoining fact of pagan religion, this gives the Roman example a separateness that allows certain complexions of events and currents of political experience to be examined with a dispassion that English history plays cannot hope to achieve. Roman history, for all its ghostly survival, is also, crucially, *finished*. Its whole course can be

plotted, its junctures more objectively identified, its lessons more certainly drawn, and the actions of its agents seen in a longer, cooler perspective.

Titus Andronicus, the first “Roman” play now associated with Shakespeare, follows the prevailing fashion of ‘blood and thunder’ tragedies of the late 1580s and early 1590s, a pattern set by Marlowe in *Tamburlaine* and followed by many seeking to emulate his popular success. Recent discussion has argued that the play was written collaboratively, probably with George Peele, and this would fit with both its date and a plausible narrative of Shakespeare’s career.¹⁵ The strand of bravura Marlovian villainy in it can be traced in Aron the Moor, a thoroughly anomalous figure in a supposedly Roman scene. But along with its marketable adoptions of Marlowe’s rhetoric of charismatic violence and of the bereaved revenger from Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, the play offers a kind of anatomy of *Romanitas* in general as an imaginative presence in the late sixteenth century.

This pressure of Rome as a poetic subject is the more urgently registered in that the play makes a complete nonsense of actual Roman history, jumbling in its omnium-gatherum plot the patricians of the Republic, the corruptions of imperial tyranny, and the convulsions of the ‘barbarian invasions’. Such a hodge-podge of Rome is best understood not as history but as a kind of fantasia on Roman themes, bearing the same relation to Rome as *Sweeney Todd* does to Victorian London. The play’s invocation of Rome as a general subject, its entertainment of the city’s whole destiny, is implicit from Titus’s first appearance:

CAPTAIN

Romans, make way. The good Andronicus,
Patron of virtue, Rome's best champion,
Successful in the battles that he fights,
With honour and with fortune is returned
From where he circumscribèd with his sword
And brought to yoke the enemies of Rome.

Sound drums and trumpets, and then enter Martius and Mutius, two of Titus' sons, and then two men bearing a coffin covered with black, then Lucius and Quintus, two other sons; then Titus Andronicus [in his chariot] and then Tamora the Queen of Goths and her sons Alarbus, Chiron and Demetrius, with Aaron the Moor and others as many as can be. Then set down the coffin, and Titus speaks

TITUS

Hail, Rome, victorious in thy mourning weeds!
Lo, as the bark that hath discharged his fraught,
Returns with precious lading to the bay
From whence at first she weighed her anchorage,
Cometh Andronicus, bound with laurel bows,
To re-salute his country with his tears,
Tears of true joy for his return to Rome.

(1.1.64-76)¹⁶

This greeting to Rome could hardly be more evocative of the 'precious lading' of the tragic. Its chiasmic structure makes the point: Rome, tears, tears, Rome: Rome is as full of tears as the coffin is of death. To engage with Rome is to enter a commerce in death, to voyage to extremity and return in victorious grief. Titus invokes the audience collectively as 'Rome' so that Rome's 'fraught' is ours. In bringing home the coffin, Titus is bringing the matter of Rome – its freight of death -- forward on the stage for our inspection, perhaps for

our destruction. The end of his triumphing, tragic journey is also the start of a 'return to Rome' for us.

The play allows the grief and strife of John Stow's Spitalfield encounter to flourish with a direct and vivid dramatic energy, a testimony to the sheer *force* of the subject for the Elizabethan stage. A series of powerful wills work in equally powerful language to wrench the currents of Roman history to their benefit, in gestures of interminable bloodshed and retribution. The remorseless titanism that made Tamburlaine so charismatic is transplanted from an Eastern exoticism to the fatal convulsions of an entire Roman heroic culture which is also, alarmingly, one of the precursors of English modernity. In *Titus Andronicus*, Roman history is a nightmare from which even Elizabethans have yet to awake.

As an enduring mythic presence rather than a site of determinate historical action, the Rome of *Titus* unfolds in a series of dramatic emblems -- a corpse borne in triumph, a woman terribly maimed, a madman shooting arrows at the gods, a mother eating her children -- culminating in its perfect realisation as a stage filled with bodies. Though staged in a kind of comic masquerade, which Titus at once sees through, the incarnation of Revenge, Rape and Murder directly in the streets in the persons of Tamora and her sons is a way of affirming how Rome is a place of allegorical extremity for the Elizabethan audience. Historical and mythic events appear at the same level of reality, a commerce emblematised when the Lavinia searches a schoolboy's textbook for a way of communicating, of *reading* her sufferings:

TITUS

Lucius, what book is that she tosseth so?

YOUNG LUCIUS

Grandsire, 'tis Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.
My mother gave it me.

MARCUS For love of her that's gone,
Perhaps she cull'd it from among the rest.

TITUS Soft, so busily she turns the leaves.
Help her. What would she find? Lavinia, shall I read?
This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus' treason and his rape,
And rape, I fear, was root of thine annoy.

MARCUS
See, brother, see. note how she quotes the leaves.
(4.1.41-50)

The action of 'quoting the leaves' -- intently studying as well as citing them -- of Ovid, and of Seneca and others throughout the play, suggests how *Titus Andronicus* is less about Roman history proper than about the impact of the fact and idea of Roman power, including the imaginative power of Latin on Renaissance inheritors like Shakespeare. As Jonathan Bate has suggested, Lavinia is in part a figure for Latin literature itself, traduced and violated by barbarian outsiders. But Sean Keilin counters that the relationship is also strangely reversed, with 'England and English writing the fortunate victims of a Roman conquest'.¹⁷ An interchange of ideas of power is figured in various kinds of violation, embedded in a language and narrative that freely depart from any obligation to literal historical accuracy. 'Quoting the leaves', Shakespeare assembles his play as a sort of Thyestean banquet of horrors, where Livy, Ovid and Seneca have equal claims. The world of *Titus* is one of violent struggle not only in its action but in its very construction for the Elizabethan imagination.¹⁸

Ten years or so later, when Shakespeare took up the history of Rome once more in *Julius Caesar* (1599), things look very different. Tamburlaine's charismatic violence has been thoroughly assimilated, embedded in questions of wider action and couched in a more detailed and capacious historiography aimed at producing a more sober, though not less tragic, account of the process of Roman history. The choice of Plutarch as source is determining here, but it also points to what Shakespeare brings to his renewed staging of Roman history that is original as much in what he does not do with Plutarch as in what he does.¹⁹

Plutarch is not a Roman historian, but a Greek rhetorician and biographer constructing parallels between major figures of Greek and Roman history in order to make a point about their comparability, and their, as it were, counterpart enactments of individual moral destinies.²⁰ But Shakespeare is not particularly interested in Plutarch's large moral and philosophical scheme of providing 'models of lives [*paradeigmata biōn*]'.²¹ He treats the whole subject of the 'Lives of the Most Noble Grecians and Romans' quite differently from the great majority of readers, including dramatists, who tended to assimilate the fortunes of ancient characters to exemplarising moral traditions like 'Fortune's Wheel' and the 'Mirror for Magistrates'.²² Instead he approaches Plutarch as a highly accomplished and detailed biographer, the recorder of the particular style and force of a personality.²³ Plundering Plutarch's vividness of biographical narrative, at times directly versifying North's translation, recomposing it and combining it with other sources, Shakespeare poses a series of intimate and searching questions about the relation of Plutarch's enterprise to that of historians such as Tacitus -- the relation of action and

personality to the variable or compelling currents of circumstance.²⁴

It is this combination of Plutarch's fine-grained and vivid detail with the scope and directedness of historical drama learned in his work on English history that makes Shakespeare's later Roman plays so original and so striking. And it may be just this confluence of his interests at once in the smaller movements of personality and in the framework of events in which that personality unfolds itself that led Shakespeare to select from Plutarch for dramatic treatment the particular lives he did – those around Julius Caesar, Marcus Antonius, and Gaius Martius Coriolanus. For each of these choices explores the exigencies of personality in relation to a key juncture of the history of Roman political organisation and institutions. In *Julius Caesar* we are shown the collapse of the Roman Republic, with its patriciate senatorial constitution of collective government, in the face of steady and remorseless pressure from individual and factional self-aggrandisement, first in Caesar and later jointly (and incompletely) in Antony and Octavius. In *Antony and Cleopatra* this scenario is then developed further and more largely, to encompass the final extinction of factional politics itself with the emergence of the solitary principate under Octavius, later Augustus, Caesar, a transformation with the very largest implications. In *Coriolanus*, finally, Shakespeare returns to a key event in the construction of the Roman Republic whose demise he has already treated: the violent but necessary subjugation of heroic masculine individualism on the Homeric model to an emerging constitution of political parties and negotiations, where the key event is the creation of the tribunate of the people depicted in the opening movement of the play.

Shakespeare did not really derive from either Plutarch or from other Roman historians this strategy of analysing key junctures in the constitutional history of the Roman Republic as the product of acts and failures by particular figures. If modern English readers think of Plutarch this way, it is because of Shakespeare's revision. Nor was this combination really a foregrounded enterprise of his English history plays, though its genesis probably lies there.²⁵ Though the later of these works -- those depicting the career of Hal as prince and then king -- trace a concerted development in their central figure's understanding of his role, they do not present any fundamental change in the institutions and procedures of the English 'constitution.' At best, one could point to a few places in these plays where some such interest seems to show itself. Richmond's language at the end of *Richard III* suggests a shift away from dynastic faction and towards a reframing of politics in ideologies of mutual love ('Fellows in arms and my most loving friends' 5.2.1) and quasi-sacramental unity ('And then -- as we have ta'en the sacrament --/ We will unite the white rose and the red.' 5.8.18-19). But his rhetoric indicates how this is conceived less as novelty than as the resetting of a political world disturbed by aberration: 'England hath long been mad and scarred herself.' (5.8.23). A more suggestive example occurs in *Richard II*, where the failure of sacramental monarchy effectively to defend itself releases a novelty of opportunity that one character describes as 'this new world' (4.1.69). The temper of politics in the play warps just here, parodying its earlier ceremonial rhythm in hectic challenges and counter-challenges amidst a blizzard of flying gauntlets. But such local instances of historic shifts remain subordinated to a project fundamentally confirming a stable legacy of English enterprise to its Elizabethan audience. The

embedding of Plutarch's moral biographies in a framework of historical and political change running from the formation to the death-agonies of the Roman Republic is quite differently conceived.²⁶

Something of the difference can be seen at once in the vigour and concentration of the opening of *Julius Caesar*, where every element is deployed to several functions. It would be hard to overemphasize how original this action is. Its constructs with great economy a focus at once on the structure of Roman politics and on the range of personalities of its patrician inhabitants. In the first scene, a brisk confrontation between Flavius and Murellus and a pair of tradesmen outlines the threat of Caesar's personal dominance, as his critics see it, to the settled order and interest of the Roman state.²⁷ Here, the standard comic word-play of the servant-clown points the patricians' frustration at how signs and circumstances are slipping from their control:

MURELLUS

...You, sir, what trade are you?

COBBLER Truly, sir, in respect of a fine workman, I am but, as you would say, a cobbler.

MURELLUS

But what trade art thou? Answer me directly.

COBBLER A trade, sir, that I hope I may use with a safe conscience, which is indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles.

FLAVIUS

What trade, thou knave? Thou naughty knave, what trade?

COBBLER Nay, I beseech you, sir, be not out with me. Yet, if you be out, sir, I can mend you.

MURELLUS

What mean'st thou by that? Mend me, thou saucy fellow!

COBBLER Why, sir, cobble you.

FLAVIUS Thou art a cobbler, art thou?

COBBLER Truly, sir, all that I live by is with the awl.
(1.1.9-20)

The second scene, with its processional crossings and offstage crowd noise punctuating the conversation in which Cassius draws out Brutus's disposition to conspiracy, gives a sense of the turbulent rush of events requiring an equal rapidity and decisiveness of individual characters, a sense sustained through the following scene of storm and subornation.²⁸ The economy with which Casca is delineated is exemplary of Shakespeare's method: in Caesar's presence he is bluntly fawning ('Peace ho! Caesar speaks.' 1.2.2), but once gone, he 'after his sour fashion' as Cassius says, affects an indifference of spirit ('I can as well be hanged as tell the manner of it. It was mere foolery, I did not mark it.' 1.2.236-7). Such detailing, carefully assembled from Plutarch's more scattered remarks, outlines a network of mutual observation and assessment whose cross-linked tensions define Roman republican politics, as when we watch Caesar discuss Cassius with Antony, while Cassius himself asks Casca for news of Cicero.²⁹ And in the background, we are kept aware of the turbulence of popular opinion, expressed in shouts and crowds and, eventually, riots.

Tragedy here is not a matter of the old machinery of Fortune, of Roman *virtus* or of Christian Virtue, but rather the new, Machiavellian concept of *virtù* – the force, courage or luck that a given personality has to rule or fail in mutable circumstances. Caesar's decision to attend the Senate at the end of Act Two is exemplary. He intends to go and defies auguries, but a magnanimous consideration for Calpurnia's welfare – already displayed in Act One – persuades him

otherwise (not, he insists, her fears themselves) until, again, the able flattery of Decius Brutus ('I can o'ersway him') changes his mind again. It is important that Decius does this job and not Brutus or Cassius – the network of tragic relations is, we might say, 'highly distributed'. That is what makes it so original, and that is the mark of Shakespeare's particular responsiveness to the density of Plutarch as historical reportage.

The handling of Plutarch, however, is shaped by a vision of historical action not found anywhere in Roman sources, and which can only be called, despite the risks of the term, 'modern'. Whether or not Shakespeare was directly aware of Machiavelli's work (and it seems unlikely), the latter's sense of the contingency and lability of historical action and of political institutions under pressure of that action is fully expressed in the plays' account of Roman history, as indeed it was in Machiavelli's response to Livy.³⁰ In Shakespeare, this sense of the force of individual agency in shaping events is registered even in small details of style and personal choice. When Brutus refuses to approve the murder of Antony because he prefers to imagine Caesar as 'a dish fit for the gods' and his assassination as the work of 'sacrificers, but not butchers' (2.1.173, 166), Cassius, having invested his own probity in the suasiveness of Brutus's unimpeached honour, cannot safely challenge the choice of metaphor with a more pragmatic political calculus. So later, the two having made up the long bitter quarrel between them (4.2), Cassius cannot overrule Brutus's disastrous decision to march on their opponents at Philippi.³¹ This is not so much a case of 'if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter' as it is a way of measuring how the final destruction of the Roman republic is as entangled with the necessities of friendship as with the

fortunes of war.³²

What goes for these small details of decision also applies to ways of speaking. Throughout the play, the characters' various rhetorics are not merely media of expression (as with Tamburlaine) but also chosen strategies of action deployed by agents in historical circumstances to do or avoid doing certain kinds of things, strategies whose results the action carefully weighs. The value and consequence of these rhetorics are central to the tragic character of the action both for the actors and for the larger fate of the Republic in its moment of crisis. Speaking to Caesar's assassination in the Forum, Brutus chooses a rhetoric of balance, order, and rationality, couched for us in the cool medium of prose. He wants to seem above all deliberate in action and commitment whereas Antony's 'Asiatic' declamation following seeks to capture and manage political momentum by extreme emotive means.³³ On such personal choices, it turns out, the fate of the Republic turns.

A notable sense of climax and transformation at the end of *Julius Caesar* underscores its particular conception of historical tragedy: Cassius is 'the last of all the Romans' (5.3.98), Brutus 'the noblest Roman of them all' (5.5.67), registering not merely individual fates, but also how a definite climacteric has passed. The republic cannot now be the thing it was, and the deaths of Brutus and Cassius tell also against the institutions in whose name and for whose interests they acted.

Shakespeare's second Plutarchan play, *Antony and Cleopatra* (ca. 1606), traces a similar enterprise in an even larger framework, one that touches the modern world directly through its reminder that Octavius's rule will

coincide with the birth of Jesus ('The time of universal peace is near.' 4.6.4). The extraordinary evocative power of this play lies partly in the sense, as carefully cultivated in the title characters' visions of one another as in other characters' – even Caesar's -- visions of them, that an alternative line of development for the history of the world is abruptly closed off after the Battle of Actium. Nowhere does Shakespeare explore antiquity as disclosing alternative worlds more than here. Nowhere is the sense of a radically different way of thinking about human possibility more plangent and beckoning than in the failure of this play's protagonists.

This sense of the giant imaginative shapes of antiquity, present in Cassius's momentary and bitter evocation of a Caesar who 'doth bestride the narrow world/ Like a Colossus' (1.2.136-7) is a pervasive feature of the world of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Cleopatra at Cydnus is a stunning mythographic self-coronation 'O'er-picturing that Venus where we see/ The fancy outwork Nature' (2.2.207-8), Antony in Cleopatra's vision kept 'realms and islands' like loose change in his pocket (5.2.90-1). The horizons of human aspiration and of mutual imaginative creation retreat under this pressure in the direction of 'new heaven, new earth', an apocalypse radically different from anything a coming Christian era could tolerate. Even Caesar, though it also benefits him, acknowledges in death the attraction of Cleopatra's 'strong toil of grace' (5.2.342) and the last word is loaded with counter-Christian charge of value.

This is not to say that their failure is not also carefully placed, and even explained by the play. Caesar is a study in success, and his success, for all its cool precision, is not to be sneered at. He is a kind of Prince Hal writ in world-historical

letters, just as Antony is Falstaff-as-Hercules. The balance of forces when the play begins is calculated to throw into relief how their contrasting styles push at the crucial moment. The differences are mapped out schematically, and with a Machiavellian analytic deliberateness, in a pair of short scenes immediately before the Battle of Actium:

3.8 *Enter Caesar with his army, marching, and Taurus*

CAESAR Taurus!

TAURUS My lord?

CAESAR

Strike not by land. Keep whole. Provoke not battle
Till we have done at sea. (*Giving a scroll*) Do not exceed
The prescript of this scroll. Our fortune lies
Upon this jump.

Exit Caesar and his army at one door, Taurus at another

3.9 *Enter Antony and Enobarbus*

ANTONY

Set we our squadrons on yon side o'th'hill
In eye of Caesar's battle, from which place
We may the number of the ships behold,
And so proceed accordingly. *Exeunt*

Antony proceeds by charismatic improvisatory response to local conditions; Caesar by careful and deliberate preparation. In Machiavelli's terms, Antony is the lion, Caesar the fox.³⁴ Antony here fails, and the failure is his ruin, but the strategy had served a younger self well in the forum scene of *Julius Caesar*. Charisma and calculation circle one another warily throughout the play, from the opening speech in which the Romanising Philo calls on his interlocutors (including the audience) to 'Behold and see' Antony's degradation (1.1.13).³⁵ He may think the two verbs reduce to the same

thing, but the play's design, especially its investment in structural paradox, refuses to endorse this view, and the contrast between them as modes of response becomes a central principle or fault-line. Enobarbus, the blunt soldier, assesses Antony as in decline and leaves him in Act Four. But his betrayal earns him a heart 'dried with grief', and he collapses in quasi-erotic longing ('O Antony! O Antony!' 4.10.22) in what must be the strangest death in Shakespeare – to be echoed by the spontaneous collapse of Iras before her mistress in the final scene.

The tragic character of this pivotal moment of Roman history for the play is perhaps best caught in a single image, as Antony in defeat struggles to understand how the power of his imaginative apprehension of himself has failed to deliver a viable historical destiny:

ANTONY

Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish;
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A tower'd citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't, that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air: thou hast seen these signs;
They are black vesper's pageants.

EROS Ay, my lord,

ANTONY

That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct,
As water is in water.

EROS It does, my lord.

ANTONY

My good knave Eros, now thy captain is
Even such a body: here I am Antony:
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave.

(4.15.2-14)

Antony may see himself as such a cloud, with all the rich pathos of the mutable that such images accrue in Shakespeare, but Octavius is the wind, which has no need to worry over its identity.

Shakespeare's final play based on Roman history, *Coriolanus* (ca. 1608), marks a sharp contraction of horizons after *Antony and Cleopatra*, the world it treats not the juggernaut of Roman imperial arms, but the card-house of the early Republic, threatened with both internal strife and external foes. It is a fierce and unyielding play, like its protagonist, a play as though expertly cast in iron, with a concentration of execution and effect that wastes nothing. Again, it stages a crisis in Roman history, demonstrating the necessity of mutual accommodations for the survival of the republican order whose politics it anatomises. Coriolanus, that engine of martial excess, remains for most of the play impervious to this necessity, and his inflexibility – or, at best, his late enlightenment at the hand of that necessity – finally destroys him.³⁶

The mould of the action is set soon after the play's opening. The door is already closed in the very first scene, when popular agitation at crippling food-shortage among the populace leads the patricians to concede the establishment of 'Five tribunes to defend their vulgar wisdoms/ Of their own choice' (1.1.213-14). It is Martius himself, as yet without the cognomen 'Coriolanus' he will earn for his deeds in war, who announces this in disgust, its full bitterness of import for himself, of course, as yet invisible. What follows, in one way, merely works out in detail the implications of this constitutional innovation – what it closes off or narrows in the way of options for the citizenship of Rome. Coriolanus'

inflexibility and steadfast commitment to his own purity of self-validating excellence can not finally be accommodated within a reformed republic that includes the new calculation of ambitiously factional popular tribunes. The pervasive taut feeling that the action of the play is already caught in a trap – its bitterness and recrimination like a fox gnawing its own leg off – stems from this choice of design. And in this sense, Coriolanus as an historical agent differs from Brutus and even from Antony. His options are fatally foreclosed, and in ways he cannot see, almost before he begins. It is not surprising that the play floats in him, claustrophobically, the fantasy of a ‘world elsewhere’ (3.3.139). But, unlike in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the imaginative disclosure of such a world is never made viable or convincing. Escape from Romans to Volscians only reveals a twin world, enclosing the same pattern of faction and intrigue, and equally intolerant of Coriolanus’ infuriating excellences. No matter what one makes of the tribunes – and the play is not complimentary – the political fact of them is determining from the start.

Whether Shakespeare himself had definite opinions about the gains and losses involved in the history of the Roman Republic is difficult to say. Some, such as Andrew Hadfield, have discerned in him republican sympathy; others, Warren Chernaik for instance, have denied this, seeing him as constructing his dramas from a variety of positions, *in utramque partem* with respect to his characters, neither endorsing nor denying, simply tracing the interplay of character, history and circumstance.³⁷ What one can say is that his deep responsiveness to Roman history as an arena of tragedy is of a piece with a central preoccupation throughout his career with dramatising the experience of *change* as both a personal and a public matter. In Jonson’s Roman plays,

powerfully influential as they were, nothing changes, things are merely confirmed more solidly as what they were before. Change may threaten but is resisted, whether as Catiline's or Sejanus's conspiracies against the state, and whether resistance is Cicero's republican activation of the *pater patriae* or Tiberius's grim confirmation of imperial rigor. In Shakespeare's versions of Roman history, however, something crucial has altered between the beginning and the end of the play, some viable historical option has gone out of the Roman world in the character of the dead protagonist, and something new emerged in the texture of final arrangements. Roman history provided an unusually dense focus at once of striking historical events and crisply delineated personalities shaping and being shaped. The combination of sweeping force with resonant detail in a political culture at once ancestral and remote proved a potent attraction to his tragic imagination.

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¹ Tragic characters even in non-Roman plays are often 'Romanised': Suffolk in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI*, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, and Chapman's *Bussy*. Even non-tragic characters turn to Rome to fulfil a tragic idea of their fate. Horatio, reaching for poison to show his love for the dying Hamlet, declares himself 'more an antique Roman than a Dane' (5.2.293). See Clifford Ronan, *'Antique Roman': Power Symbolology and the Roman Play in Early Modern England* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 156-163.

² Daniel Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture 1500-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 12.

³ Earlier accounts of Britain survived in fragments from Pytheas's voyages of the late fourth century BCE in later writings of Strabo, Pliny and others, but these are ethnographic and geographic rather than historical.

⁴ *Cymbeline* (ca. 1610) stages part of the Roman invasion of Britain and even includes scenes in 'Rome'. Though printed as a Tragedy in the 1623 Folio, the play will not be considered here, being more a tragicomedy, or indeed an example of Polonius's chimerical 'tragical-comical-historical-pastoral'. *Cymbeline*'s Rome is largely a Renaissance Italian city of erotic intrigue; what historical character it has comes from non-Roman sources. For legal and constitutional issues in its historiography, see J. Clinton Crumley, 'Questioning History in *Cymbeline*', *Studies in English Literature* 41.2 (Spring, 2001), 297-315.

⁵ Compare Robert S. Miola's description of Rome as both *alia* and *eadem* -- other and the same -- in 'Shakespeare's Ancient Rome: Difference and Identity' in Michael Hattaway ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 193-213.

⁶ Freud notes how, in German, the 'unheimlich' or 'uncanny' is entangled with the 'heimlich' or 'homely'. For him, the essence of an 'uncanny' feeling is the revelation of what has been concealed or repressed in the familiar. See Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' [1919] trans. Alix Strachey, reprinted in Benjamin Nelson ed., *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 122-61. For an 'uncanny' Rome in Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's Rome as 'uncanny' for later readers, see Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers* (London: Methuen, 1987), esp. Ch. 3.

⁷ John Stow, *A Survey of London; reprinted from the text of 1603*, C.L Kingsford ed., 1908, Text modernized from online publication accessed 11 August 2013 at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=60033#n2>

⁸ Each of the biographies in the Elizabethan editions of North's Plutarch featured a medallion image, and coinage was, for the early modern period, essentially a Roman technology. See Sean Keilen, *Vulgar Eloquence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 79-83.

⁹ The early modern assumption that Rome was the fountain of heroic pasts explains the belief that Romans built Stonehenge. See, e.g. the architect Inigo Jones' posthumous (1655) book discussed in Caroline Van Eck, *Inigo Jones on Stonehenge* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 2010).

¹⁰ 'Julius Cesar's ill-erected tower' reappears as tragic icon and harbinger in *Richard II* (V.1.2). All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, second edn, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

¹¹ Assuming *Richard III* was performed at the 'Theatre' just north of London. On consciousness of Roman history underlying local history outside London, see Sheila Christie, 'When in Rome: Shifting Conceptions of the Chester Cycle's Roman References in Pre- and Post-Reformation England' in Jessica Dell, David Klausner and Helen Ostovich, eds, *The Chester Cycle in Context: Religion, Drama and the Impact of Change* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 149-60.

¹² Roman history was not only available in historians proper, but in other genres as well. The career of Julius Caesar, for instance, appears in Virgil and Ovid and in Lucan's poem *Pharsalia*. Octavius's victory at Actium was portrayed memorably, if briefly, by both Virgil in the *Aeneid* (Book Eight) and Horace in his 'Cleopatra Ode' (1.37). Against these

portrayals, even more than against Plutarch, Shakespeare's development of Cleopatra is especially radical.

¹³ See F.J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), Ch. VI, and James Shapiro, *1599 – A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (London; Faber and Faber, 2005), Ch. 7.

¹⁴ G. K. Hunter, *English Drama 1586-1642: The Age of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 449-50, and also 86-92, 449-60, 466-73.

¹⁵ See Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Ch. 3.

¹⁶ The Oxford edition emends to two coffins; early texts indicate one, as here. Oxford also emends 'fraught' to 'freight' which I have restored, since our overtone of promise or menace is recorded from 1576.

¹⁷ See Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 83-117 and Keilen, 91-3.

¹⁸ Julie Taymor's 1999 film of the play responds Shakespeare's play by compiling a landscape of Romes, including ancient ruins, Fascist architecture and the 'Popemobile,' jumbled together, and framed by the aggressive and terrified fantasy life of a boy.

¹⁹ North's Plutarch, first published in 1579, was a best-seller, mostly not taken up by dramatists. Shakespeare is unusual in choosing it – Lodge used Ammianus for his *Wounds of Civil War* (publ. 1594), while later Roman plays following Jonson's *Sejanus* (perf. 1603; publ. 1605) built a line of 'tyrant plays' on Tacitus and Suetonius. For Roman matters as *topoi* in the drama of the period see Ronan, and also Hunter.

²⁰ On Plutarch, see D.A. Russell, *Plutarch* (London: Duckworth, 1973). Russell's comment on Plutarch's biographical project is helpful: '*Bion graphein*, "to write a

life”, carries connotations alien to modern concepts of biography. The differences are important if we are to understand what Plutarch intended. *Bios* means, roughly, ‘way of life’, whether in an individual or a society... It also has some connotations of *ordinary* life, and is associated with the realism of comedy rather than the grand topics of epic or, for that matter, history.’ And again ‘the question which is being answered all along is the rather unsophisticated “What sort of man was he?” that could almost find adequate answer in a series of descriptive adjectives.’ (101-103).

²¹ Plutarch’s Antony exemplifies ‘the corruptions of *erōs* and the effects of flattery [*kolakeia*’] (Russell, 135). As an account of Shakespeare’s Antony, this would be grossly inadequate.

²² For a detailed discussion of an exemplarising tradition in relation to *Julius Caesar*, see Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: the Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), Ch. 5.

²³ Curiously, given the artistry with which Shakespeare shaped Plutarch’s material as a biographer, there is no reference to this attention in the recent volume edited by Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker, *Writing Lives: Biography and Textuality, Identity and Representation in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁴ For a digest of North’s Plutarch as used by Shakespeare, see T.J.B. Spencer ed., *Shakespeare’s Plutarch : the lives of Julius Caesar, Brutus, Marcus Antonius and Coriolanus in the translation of Sir Thomas North* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964). The convenience of Spencer’s collocations, however, obscures the synthetic labour Shakespeare subjected Plutarch to and the extent of his reading throughout the volume, borrowing details from lives not directly employed, even from marginalia.

²⁵ See the discussion of *2 Henry 6* by Dermot Cavanagh, ‘Sovereignty and Commonwealth in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*,

Part 2' in Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 619-34.

²⁶ A forerunner is Shakespeare's narrative poem, *Lucrece* (publ. 1594 and retitled *The Rape of Lucrece* from 1616). Here Lucrece's suicide immediately motivates the expulsion of the Tarquins and the invention of the Roman republic. The choice of this moment for narrative treatment suggests how Shakespeare's response to Roman history from an early date placed individual fates in relation to historical crises.

²⁷ Usually tagged as tribunes in modern editions, Flavius and Murellus (or Marullus), are not so identified in the play, and their actions here attach them to the patrician/republican party opposing Caesar. Casca later reports that they have been 'put to silence' -- we are not told how or by whom -- for 'pulling scarves off Caesar's images' (1.2.285-6).

²⁸ For excellent discussion of how the shape of these scenes develops 'scenic forms' from earlier plays, including by other writers, see Emrys Jones, *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 18-23, 106-113. Jones later discusses *Antony and Cleopatra* in relation to *Henry V*.

²⁹ Brutus even remembers Casca at school (1.2.296)!

³⁰ From the vast literature on Machiavelli, see especially J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

³¹ This is surely the structural justification for the length and intensity of the quarrel on stage -- the resulting exhaustion and fragility underpin the fatal mistake.

³² Pascal's famous maxim is 'Had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, the whole face of the world would have changed.' ('Le nez de Cléopâtre: s'il eût été plus court, toute la face de la terre aurait changé.' *Pensées*, 162).

³³ 'Asiatic' rhetoric, a classical style of speaking, was marked by highly emotive presentation, and was contrasted by Cicero and others with a sparer, more pointed 'Attic' style. The terms encode Hellenistic and Roman ideologies of national character. See M.L. Clarke, *Rhetoric at Rome*, third edn, revised D.H. Berry (London: Routledge, 1996). The same contrast in rhetorical styles is apparent in Antony and Octavius in *Antony and Cleopatra*, though that play is less interested in public rhetoric.

³⁴ See Machiavelli's remarks in *The Prince*, Ch 18. He calls on rulers to use both beast *personae*, but by Chapter 25 has to concede that changing circumstances will eventually exhaust any ruler's flexibility, a concession which marks the collapse of the book's central project. An English text of *The Prince* (translated by W.K. Marriot) can be found at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1232/1232-h/1232-h.htm#link2HCH0018> and an Italian text at [http://it.wikisource.org/wiki/Il Principe](http://it.wikisource.org/wiki/Il_Principe) .

³⁵ Philo is a Greek name, so a 'Roman' assessment is not the exclusive property of actual Romans.

³⁶ For an account of these failed transitions in a world dominated by oath, contract, fidelity and compromise, see John Kerrigan, 'Coriolanus Fidiussed', *Essays in Criticism* LXII, no.4 (2012), 319-53.

³⁷ See Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and, contra, Warren Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. 244-48, also the various essays in David Armitage, Conal Condren and Andrew Fitzmaurice, eds, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
