

“The Shakespearean Moment” in American Popular/ Political Culture: Editorializing in the Age of Trump

James S. Baumlin | Missouri State University

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Abstract | This present essay meditates on media deployments of the term, “Shakespearean,” offering an analysis of its political implications. As a micro-instance of Shakespearean appropriation, such TV-editorial invocations of the Bard’s name and writings reflect on the ways that some (not all) American television audiences interpret and respond to the present historic moment. It’s the thesis of this essay that the so-called “Shakespearean moment” makes history visible: In times such as these, we come to recognize that “all the world’s a stage” and that we, as audience/witnesses of the contemporary *theatrum mundi*, are active participants in that political history.

As a corollary to this thesis, the present essay explores the several ironies informing Shakespeare’s tragic archetypes (specifically Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth); these character-types, in turn, “hold [...] the mirror” (*Hamlet* 3.2.18–19) up to our own political culture and its “players.” Within Shakespearean tragedy, a character’s emotional/moral intelligence—which includes the capacity to distinguish right from wrong (irrespective of one’s choosing right over wrong)—rests in an equal capacity for self-reflection. Within one particular strand of American politics today, this capacity proves lacking. “The Shakespearean moment,” thus, draws politics, social psychology, and stage history into its purview. Perhaps an awareness of the ironies inherent in this moment can give citizens—as audience/witnesses of the *theatrum mundi*—the means to read, critique, and resist the cultish authoritarianism currently promoted by that singular political strand.

As a coda to this thesis, the present essay notes how different Western epochs—Romantic, “high” modern, and postmodern—identify with specific Shakespearean character-types. These shifting identifications reflect the evolving “category of the person,” as charted by Marcel Mauss. The social psychology of personhood remains “in process” today, and Shakespearean drama seems prescient in anticipating our ways of experiencing and representing the self. So, having lived through the first quarter of the 21st century, we might ask: In which Shakespearean character do we discover our current cultural “mirror”?

Keywords | Self, Persona, *Theatrum Mundi*, Shakespearean Moment, Irony, Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth, Sophocles, Oedipus, Donald J. Trump, New York State Prosecution of Trump, Political Theatre, American Popular Culture

Suppose we have no access to any “essential” meaning nestling within Shakespeare’s texts and awaiting our discovery [...]. Then what can their purpose be? If they do not transmit the meaning intended and embodied within them by their author, what on earth do Shakespeare’s plays do? [...]

[F]or us, the plays have the same function as, and work like, the words of which they are made. We *use* them in order to generate meaning. In the twentieth century, Shakespeare’s plays have become one of the central agencies through which our culture performs this operation. That is what they do, that is how they work, and that is what they are for. Shakespeare doesn’t mean: *we mean by Shakespeare.*

—Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (3; emphasis in original)

From mid-April through May 2024, Donald J. Trump—the twice-impeached, three-times indicted 45th president of the United States—has campaigned for reelection while on trial in New York state court for unlawfully influencing the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Never in the 248-year history of the nation has a president faced criminal prosecution. While conservative news outlets seek to normalize Trump’s behavior, portraying him as the victim of a politically biased legal system, most mainstream (in right-wing parlance, “liberal”) media outlets struggle to express the abnormality of these times.

The occasion for this essay comes from a recent cable news broadcast when the TV host, commenting on U.S. lawyer-politicians taking plea deals for having broken the law, declared the moment “truly Shakespearean.” As a teacher of Shakespeare, I found the reference vague and yet somehow apt. She must have relied on her audience’s complicity in that phrase, which (I think) is easier to exemplify than explain. When, for example, some public figure does something monumentally stupid or mean and that act then redounds upon the person’s own head: Is that what the TV host intended by the term, “Shakespearean”? When some politician leads a crowd chanting “Lock her up!” and then gets locked up himself, can we call that “Shakespearean”? Surely there’s some “cosmic irony” in such a moment, when the political “engineer” is “Hoist with his own petar” (*Hamlet* 3.4.210–11) and the bomb blows up in his face. There’s something incredulous, as well. We find it hard to believe that anyone could be so stupid or so mean as to do or to say ... that. “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it”: Words to that effect invite us to call a moment “Shakespearean.” So I assume. But there’s something more lurking in this usage. It’s not just the actor or the action that defines such a moment; saliently,

the action occurs within a “political theater”—within our own culture’s *theatrum mundi*, of which we citizens are the audience.¹

There is, thus, a broader cultural backdrop in deployments of the term, “Shakespearean.” In *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Douglas Lanier writes, “the notion of an ‘authentic Shakespeare,’ [...] is in reality always a social construct, one intimately linked to the history and politics of cultural institutions *and their audiences*, to various protocols of interpretation, and to competing notions of social decorum and pleasure” (19; emphasis added). He cites Stephen Orgel’s “discussion of key moments in the early history of Shakespearean performance” where, in each case, “what is ‘authentic’ turns out always to be ‘something that is not in the text; it is something behind it and beyond it that the text is presumed to represent’ [Orgel 24]” (Lanier 19). In the usage that I’m describing, this “something behind” or “beyond” is indeed a social construction, wherein “Shakespeare” is invoked as interpretant/critic of our own cultural texts and performances. Superimposed upon U.S. politics, “we” are no longer analyzing or critiquing Shakespeare; rather, “he” critiques *us* (or, more specifically here, our politics and politicians). And, in so doing, “he” calls attention to our own active roles in the *theatrum mundi* of our times.

It surprises me that the magisterial Oxford English Dictionary gives no instance of the term “Shakespearean,” ironic or otherwise, deployed in cultural contexts. Web search engines don’t help, either, and that surprises me even more.² American high schoolers are taught three types of irony: verbal, situational, and dramatic. And they’re

¹In a *Washington Post* web article, Peter W. Stevenson offers “A brief history of the ‘Lock her up!’ chant by Trump supporters against Clinton,” Hillary Clinton having been Trump’s opponent in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Stevenson writes, “Nearing the end of his speech at the Republican National Convention” in July 2016, the New Jersey governor Chris Christie “was in the middle of an attack on Hillary Clinton, listing what he saw as her many missteps as secretary of state. After each perceived misstep, he asked the crowd, ‘Is she guilty or not guilty?’ ‘Guilty!’ the crowd thundered back again and again [...]. The chant swelled to a roar, and delegates began standing up from their seats. They waved their red, white and blue ‘Trump’ signs. They shook their fists. They screamed and hollered and made the building shake, in that now-familiar three-beat chant: ‘Lock her up! Lock her up! Lock her up!’” Stevenson adds, “by the next evening, it was a go-to refrain, punctuating every mention of Clinton’s name. It fit right in with Trump’s core pitch to voters: that Clinton couldn’t and shouldn’t be trusted. His fans broke out in the chant at any mention of the Clinton Foundation, the email server or any other of his attacks on her.”

It’s not Christie who would lead later chants, but the likes of Michael Flynn, Roger Stone, Steve Bannon, Rudy Giuliani, and Trump himself. Of these five names, the first three have been convicted of crimes while the latter two remain under federal indictment. As I write, Trump’s New York state trial for election interference has been given to a jury to decide. As I’ve already noted, *The People of the State of New York v. Donald J. Trump* marks the first criminal jury trial of a U.S. president. The 34 felony charges brought against Trump include the falsification of business records aimed at concealing “hush money” payments to pornographic film actress, Stormy Daniels. News of Trump’s alleged affair with Daniels threatened to scuttle his 2016 campaign; hence, payments for the porn star’s silence served unlawfully to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Poignantly, the days of trial testimony given by Michael Cohen—Trump’s one-time lawyer and loyal “fixer” turned state’s cooperating witness—were declared “almost Shakespearean” by two different cable TV news commentators (though here, too, audiences are left to divine their meaning).

²The online urbandictionary.com does offer several humorous (and obviously non-political) uses. These include “Shakespearean drunk,” being “the point of inebriation where one becomes possessed of legendary eloquence” (and which “may or may not involve lecturing people endlessly on things that they probably do not want to hear”), and “Shakespearean sex,” which is “full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.” Oh, well.

taught to find these in Shakespeare's plays. The TV example that I've given above belongs to political editorializing and public commentary, and we might question how it fits within these literary-interpretive terms.³

To appreciate the Shakespearean moment as I'm describing it, we must read culture in much the same way that we're taught to read his plays. Recent scholars (Garber, Lanier, and Huang and Rivlin) have focused on appropriation—reinventions of Shakespeare's plots, characters, themes, and language. While many adaptations do make for political commentary, their aesthetic practice differs from my topic, in which popular/political culture is discovering within itself, ready-made as it were, a range of Shakespearean analogs. For the nonce, let's divide the *theatrum mundi* into four parcels: the author, the players, the public stage or backdrop, and the audience. In our contemporary *theatrum*, it's popular/political culture that provides the stage and the players. In the very specific deployment that I'm seeking to describe, there is no author or director standing over the players, providing a script and stage directions; there is, however, that vital creature that we call an audience.

In relearning to read our political culture, we might look to A.C. Bradley for a starting point. In his seminal text, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), Bradley notes the dramatic irony abounding in *Macbeth*:

I do not refer to irony in the ordinary sense; to speeches, for example, where the speaker is intentionally ironical [...]. I refer to irony on the part of the author himself, to ironical juxtapositions of persons and events, and especially to the "Sophoclean irony" by which a speaker is made to use words bearing to the audience, in addition to his own meaning, a further and ominous sense, hidden from himself and, usually, from the other persons on the stage. (338–39)

As professional students of literature, we know how to apply the term, Sophoclean: Bradley shows us how. Of course, media pundits nowadays don't say, "How Sophoclean!" in their editorializing. It's not simply a matter of cultural currency—of the fact that contemporary American audiences maintain some contact still with Shakespeare, whereas the Greek dramatists have retreated largely into college coursework in the classics. Besides, there's a notable difference between Sophoclean and Shakespearean irony, one that rests in the differing cultural *ethoi* of their characters. Here, I'm following Martin Hollis (who is himself indebted to French anthropologist, Marcel Mauss) in charting the evolving Western "category of the person."

³Summarizing Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between "bourgeois and popular responses to art," Lanier notes that "high culture values art for the access it provides to moral and aesthetic universals extracted from experience," whereas popular culture, "by contrast, emphasizes participation, encouraging identification with characters, involvement with the performance, [and] relevance to immediate circumstances" (60). Thus, the aesthetic "distance" (60) central to high-cultural response gives way to a sense of immediacy: Audiences become immersed in (and participate in) the moment when art and history coalesce. I remain unsettled as to which type of aesthetic response is reflected in "the Shakespearean moment" here described. Such a moment invites a "knowing" critical stance grounded in one's acquaintance with "high culture" Shakespeare. As audience/witnesses, do we immerse ourselves in, or stand at a critical distance from, the politics as they unfold? Perhaps our response demands a double vision, one alternating between distance and immersion.

As recorded in Sophocles, the Attic self inhabits a set of socially-determined roles and behaviors, whereas the early-modern self as represented in Shakespeare has evolved through various cultural-historic stages leading from the “social self” of Greek antiquity through the late Roman/early Christian “private/familial self” to the early-modern/Cartesian “hidden self” to the “divided self” of our own Freudian-inflected modernism.⁴ For the Attic self, we can take Oedipus as our exemplar; for the (early-) modern self, we can take Hamlet. (We could add Lear, Macbeth, and others to this discussion, but Hamlet, for now, will do.)

Here’s a forecast of my argument. I begin with an outline of the reflexivity built into Shakespearean character-creation, demonstrating how moments of self-reflection (what Harold Bloom describes as self-overhearing) turn individuals into both agents and *their own* audiences. Though of little news to Shakespeare scholars, such an outline can help contextualize this discussion of contemporary political culture. As I read its use in media commentary, the term “Shakespearean” serves to identify or, more saliently, “to make visible” our own historical moment, when we become aware of ourselves as witness/audience *within* that moment. I’ll end with a coda on the ways that different Western epochs have found their cultural “mirrors” in specific Shakespearean characters. If the high-modernist first half of the 20th century identified with Hamlet, and the postmodernist second half identified with King Lear, we might ask which character “hold[s], as ‘twere, the mirror up” to our experience of the 21st century.

“The Shakespearean Moment” and Its Audience: Bearing Witness to/within History

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts [...]

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (2.7.139–42)

⁴Adapting this model, we chart a further evolution through the late 18th-century Romantic “hypertrophied self” to the so-called high-modern “alienated self”—which remained the dominant (Western) mode of subjectivity reaching from the mid-19th century Industrial Age through to World War II (see Baumeister). This evolution in “the category of the person” continues through our own belated age, which is marked by an emergent postmodern “self-in-process.” I apologize for this detour into theory. It’s justified, I believe, by the patent lack of self-reflexivity shown in instances of our own contemporary political theater and its players. A full discussion merits an essay in itself; here, a footnote or two must serve.

There is considerable overlap in these categories: The accretions to personhood within each epoch become, indeed, part of our own (post)modern birthright. We remain, today, social selves and private, hidden selves and divided, potentially hypertrophied but most definitely alienated economically and politically. As “selves in process,” we negotiate the *Innenwelt* and *Ausserwelt* as we reach toward that great elusive prize (as described in Jungian analytic psychology): individuation. Need we note that not everyone in our species possesses strong powers of self-reflection? Many remain content to identify with (and experience the world through) their social selves, blissfully (woefully?) unconscious of the ways culture and its institutions (political, educational, medical, corporate, etc.), technologies, and structures of economy contribute to one’s self-fashioning.

It is one of the fascinating effects of Shakespeare's plays that they have almost always seemed to coincide with the times in which they are read, published, produced, and discussed.

—Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (“Introduction”)

“O me, what hast thou done?” (3.4.25) cries Gertrude, Hamlet having struck blindly through the arras in her bedroom, killing Polonius. “Nay, I know not. / Is it the king?” (3.4.27–28) is Hamlet's horrifically unreflective reply. In teaching the Shakespearean texts, I've looked for specific moments of insight, typically on the part of characters but often, *as instances of irony*, on the part of audiences as well: As I teach it, the Shakespearean moment arises from within an act of radical self-reflection. Often a character speaks or acts unreflectively, such that understanding comes only after a word is spoken or a deed is done. Hence, the Shakespearean moment unfolds onstage when outward action and inward self-reflection smash together, coalescing.⁵

In that moment, a character becomes his or her own audience, witness, and judge: Often, the actions that follow come as a response to that pregnant moment. I turn again to Hamlet, albeit in a specific production: “Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad” (3.1.142–43), the prince declares to Ophelia, the “it” being Hamlet's raging against women's infidelity (driven, we assume, by his mother's “o'erhasty” remarriage, with its violation of the rites of mourning). Where most performances stress the prince's rage (“it hath *made me mad*...”), Derek Jacoby—by acclamation one of the great Hamlets of the late 20th century—finds a moment of self-reflection.⁶ “Go to,” he yells, shaking Ophelia by the shoulders; but, drawing back, he comes to a realization, “it *hath* made me mad...” By this inflection, “it *hath* made me mad,” Jacoby shifts from impulsive action to self-reflection, becoming his own audience and critic.

In my own imaginary direction of the scene, I'd play upon Hamlet's acute sense of being watched. Most of his words in this scene—the ones “made” to sound “mad”—are intended for Claudius and Polonius; these should be spoken in loud raging tones. Yet there are other words—“Get thee to a nunnery...” (3.1.119)—that can be spoken whisperingly though no less urgently, as if for Ophelia's ears alone. Why shouldn't Hamlet want to spare her from the carnage that's to come? Why shouldn't a nunnery (assuming that such a Catholic refuge exists in Hamlet's Elsinore) have a different meaning for Ophelia than for the king or her father? And there are words whose private meanings belong to the prince alone. In such a scene, Hamlet's words make their appeal to four audiences: to the king and Polonius, to Ophelia, and to Hamlet himself—not to mention the audience offstage. This multiplication of audiences is vital in appreciating

⁵“Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better” (3.4.32–33) are words that Hamlet pronounces over Polonius's body. But it's Hamlet's “rash and bloody deed” (3.4.28), as Gertrude decries it, that here turns the Danish prince from “just” avenger to “mere” murderer. “For this same lord, [*pointing to Polonius*] / I do repent” (3.4.176–77), Hamlet says later in the scene. Though his contrition seems sincere, surely he knows the fatal consequences of this “rash” act. In a mortal twist of irony, the hunter has become the hunted: Hamlet, having turned Laertes into the “son of a dear father murdered” (2.2.550), has brought vengeance down upon his own head. Even now, Hamlet knows that his own death is immanent: The time remaining to him “will be short” (5.2.73), as he says later to Horatio.

⁶I'm referring to Jacoby's performance in the 1980 BBC television staging of *Hamlet* (Bennet and Gorrie).

the Shakespearean moment, since each audience responds in accordance with its varying levels of understanding.

This irony of self-overhearing was revolutionary in Shakespearean theater, for proof of which we might turn to his friend and fellow playwright, Ben Jonson. In *Timber, or Discoveries* (1630), Jonson offers the following anecdote:

I remember, the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare that in his writing (whatsoever he penned) he never blotted out line. My answer hath been, would he had blotted a thousand. [...] Many times he fell into those things could not escape laughter: as when he said in the person of Caesar, one speaking to him, “Caesar, thou dost me wrong,” he replied “Caesar did never wrong, but with just cause,” and such like, which were ridiculous. But he redeemed his vices with his virtues. (52)

In *Julius Caesar*, the passage now reads “Know, Caesar doth not wrong, nor without cause / Will he be satisfied” (3.1.47–48). Frankly, the version recorded by Jonson is far more poignant, precisely because of its ironic self-reversal.

In Jonsonian character-creation, the players’ words reflect an unchanging mind: They know what they intend and they say what they mean. In the version given in *Timber*, Shakespeare’s Caesar begins with a patent lie—that he “did never wrong”—and ends with a half-hearted self-justification (“...but with just cause”). In this seeming “ridiculous” about-face, Shakespeare’s Caesar reveals an irony lying at the core of his character. Far from embodying Roman justice or “just cause,” Caesar shows us mere tyranny wrapped in the pomp of state. Though delusional in his inflated self-image, Shakespeare’s Caesar remains his own most attentive, admiring audience.⁷

Returning to Bradley: As he describes it, there’s a “Sophoclean irony” inherent in the *anagnorisis* or “moment of recognition” that Aristotle sees as an effect of classical Greek tragedy. While the Shakespearean moment shares this same irony, it deepens the Sophoclean model by virtue of a deepening interiority and reflexivity within its representations of character. If we compare Sophocles’s Oedipus to Shakespeare’s Hamlet, we’ll note a real distinction in their character-creation, though in each case their tragedies involve a crisis of knowledge. Oedipus lacks knowledge of his parentage; and that ignorance, conjoined to a willful temperament, leads him to commit the supreme sacrilege of parricide. The discovery of his parentage leads, in Aristotelian terms, to his *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*—to a “recognition” that brings with it a “reversal of fortune.” By my reading, the most ironic of “Sophoclean ironies” arises in his incestuous mother/wife Jocasta’s desperate plea: To her husband/son’s dogged resolution—“I will find out the whole truth”—she rejoins, “Ill-fated man. May you never find out who you are” (77). Though a modern audience shudders at this will-to-ignorance, there’s a

⁷It goes without saying that I accept the Jonsonian version as a legitimate textual variant and, quite likely, as representing Shakespeare’s original intention. In a gloss to his edition of the play, T.S. Dorsch concurs: “It seems probable,” writes Dorsch, “that the Folio version represents an alteration made by Shakespeare or his company, perhaps in deference to a spoken criticism by Jonson” (65).

By the way, Jonson (being a self-taught classicist) would have known the rhetorical term for this sort of self-correction: *epanorthosis*. We see this habit of self-correction—rhetorically, of replacing one word or phrase for another—time and again in Hamlet, as in this early exchange with Gertrude: “Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’” (1.2.76).

fundamental difference between Sophoclean *anagnorisis* and that of Shakespeare. In Sophocles, the knowledge that Oedipus longs for *lies outside of him*, delivered by seers and messengers. It is not “hidden” inside the self, somehow divided from ego-consciousness and its capacity for self-reflection. Hamlet’s “mystery,” in contrast, comes from within. It’s an inward self-division that, in his case, “puzzles the will” (3.1.80).

Though I’m inclined to grant ontology to the self—that is, to treat the self as more than “mere fiction,” *contra* postmodernist/deconstructionist criticism—it’s not a mode of *being selves* but the modes of *representing selfhood* that I’m seeking to chart.⁸ Whereas selfhood ascribes an interiority within the individual, personhood describes the point of interface between the *Innenwelt* of the self and the *Ausserwelt* of material-social reality. Within the archetypal psychology of Carl Jung, the persona is precisely that component of the complex psyche that mediates between the inner and outer worlds. As “a kind of mask,” its functioning is both projective and protective, “designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual” (Jung, *Two Essays* 190). Our societal roles (which include our occupations, social/personal relationships, hobbies, and public haunts) belong not to an inward “authentic self,” but rather to the outward-facing persona. Hence, the healthy ego expresses itself *through* the persona without identifying *with* the persona. Still, it’s by means of our roleplaying that we come to understand ourselves and learn to interpret/respond to others.

Note how the vocabularies of theater and social psychology converge. We are ourselves actors and audiences simultaneously. In point of fact, our role as audience does double duty, in that we watch ourselves even as we watch others. We “know” ourselves as a product of self-reflection, just as we “know” others by external observation. Concomitantly, observation entails judgment and elicits response (the complexity of response leading through the gamut of human action, gesture, and affect). The persona/mask of personhood, thus, mediates between sociology and psychology; the persona is janiform in this respect. The *Innenwelt* is itself divided, as well, in that we become audience/witness as well as performer within an internal drama that constructs and interprets self-experience, hence informing self-identity. In effect, we “know” ourselves as other: Self-identity, thus, is dyadic, in that we observe, reflect, judge, and respond to our own inner voice, even as that voice is inflected by/infected with alien words, images, and affects.

By roleplaying, thus, our lifeworlds translate into a *theatrum mundi*. The masks that we wear or observe in others provide the *dramatis personae*, to which the Shakespearean stage has made hefty contributions. Marjorie Garber makes this point: “In psychological, sociological, and sometimes philosophical terms—as well as in literary studies—it is often Shakespeare who defines character and character types for the modern world” (*Character* 18). In the 21st century, media-driven pop culture supplies its own

⁸Even if it were fictional, the self-concept proves “a necessary fiction” (O’Dair 83). As Greenblatt writes in the personal narrative that ends *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, “to abandon the craving for freedom, and to let go of one’s stub hold upon selfhood, even selfhood conceived as a fiction, is to die. [...] I want to bear witness at the close to my overwhelming need to sustain the illusion that I am the principal maker of my own identity” (257; qtd. in O’Dair 88). A curious effect of this reasoning is to reverse the relationship traditionally assumed between self and persona. Rather than the self fashioning its outward “mask” or persona, the persona here “invents” the self, privileging its (idealized) image as the stable core of identity.

favorite character types; these, Garber notes, “include the Politician, the Athlete, and the Celebrity” (*Character* 47), to which we can add “the News Pundit” and “the Internet Influencer.” In the specific media instance given above (“Lock her up! Lock her up!”), it’s the Politician that dominates. And I’d like to speculate on a shift in the popular/political use of Shakespearean typology specifically: In the 21st century, it’s the political tyrant (à la Greenblatt) that dominates. The history plays give us Richard III, the Roman plays Coriolanus and Julius Caesar (recent revivals of which make specific allusion to contemporary American politicians), and the tragedies give us Macbeth. Before landing in the present age, however, we might glance back through recent decades and their “cultural uses” of Shakespearean archetypes. Indeed, we might pause briefly over the cultural forces (technological, political, ideological) that, historically, inform and condition “the category of the person.”

As for the Politician, the Athlete, and the Celebrity, these are character-types *behind which* the healthy ego may reside. Yet “the danger,” as Jung describes it, is when individuals “become identical with their personas—the professor with his textbook, the tenor with his voice” (*Memories* 416).⁹ A result of such persona-identification, as Anthony Stevens notes, is the sort of “shallow, brittle, conformist kind of personality which is ‘all persona,’ with its excessive concern for ‘what people think’” (43). In this state of identification, “people are utterly unconscious of any distinction between themselves and the world in which they live. They have little or no concept of themselves as beings distinct from what society expects of them” (Dawson 267). As Jungian-archetypal psychology teaches us, the persona can become hardened over a lifetime of repetition-in-behavior/performance, such that the mask and the face seem to dissolve into one.¹⁰ This describes a pathology in which the living individual becomes a mere stock character, largely incapable of self-reflection, much less of change.¹¹ And it’s in this

⁹The citations in this paragraph are gathered from the web article, “Persona.”

¹⁰In Shakespeare’s time, this persona-identification was often portrayed as the effect of “humours” on individual personality. Renaissance humour theory held that individuals were governed emotionally, cognitively, psychologically, and socially by a dominant trait, typically innate and physiological in origin, whose influence on behavior became habituated over time. Shakespeare’s minor, stock characters are often reduced to a single humour, which is then reflected in their cartoonish simplicity. His plays, the comedies especially, have their share of pedants, fools, boasting soldiers, cowards, drunkards, courtesans, and so on. I have no doubt that Shakespeare would cast today’s Politician as a cartoonish stock character.

Note that persona-effects are not entirely absent from the great tragedies, whose major characters have their flaws. Such is the classical-Aristotelian theory, which views a play’s tragic protagonists through the double lens of *hamartia* and *arete*—that is, of a “tragic flaw” counterbalanced by some nobility, virtue, or heightened “power of action.” Yes, Hamlet is melancholy, Othello jealous, Lear vain, and Macbeth ambitious; but it’s more than jealousy that brings down Othello, more than melancholy that brings down Hamlet, more than ambition that brings down Macbeth, and more than vanity that brings down Lear. These great characters, for all their flaws, possess an emotional/moral intelligence grounded in self-reflection. Even Macbeth, tragic villain though he is, suffers from the burden of conscience/consciousness.

¹¹There’s an easy criterion, actually, for judging the extent of one’s persona-identification. Is that individual capable of doing or saying something “out of character”? Can that person say or do something genuinely surprising, not just to others but to the self? A capacity for self-reflection is the first requisite of moral intelligence, the second being the capacity to change one’s mind. Possessed of an “unchanging mind,” today’s political players can do little more than double-down on their dangerous folly, both in word and in deed. At its worst, the character-type of the Politician is never more than a caricature of personhood—in effect, a cartoon.

context that our contemporary Politician, the one who chants “Lock her up!” needs to be seen.

In all likelihood, the person who performs such an act remains blissfully unaware of the irony unleashed by their words and actions. *They* “don’t get” the irony. *We* get it. Our own *theatrum mundi* diverges from the Shakespearean stage on this point: It’s not the political “player” but the audience that pauses to reflect. Culturally, then, the Shakespearean moment is now realized *when we become aware of ourselves as the audience* bearing witness to someone else’s performance. It’s in this moment that we recognize the literal truth that “all the world” *is* “a stage.” In effect, our moment in history provides the scenic backdrop, becoming our theater. And this leads to a further insight, in that the Shakespearean moment empowers us, as audience, to respond to the world’s political “players” and their performances. Though we may be victimized in many respects, we are not entirely passive. For, remember: Theater demands an audience. And our task, which is simultaneously ethical and aesthetic, is to give judgment. As witnesses, we are part of history. Our responses matter. When the ironies unfold and we bear witness to them, declaring their impact on our own recordings of history, surely we ourselves enter into the Shakespearean moment. When our own moment in history becomes visible: That, I would argue, constitutes the Shakespearean moment in contemporary popular/political culture.

This essay could end here, in an explication of the ironies found in media representations of contemporary politics and politicians. There is, however, a larger issue raised within the interpretive history of specific Shakespearean characters and their prominence in an age’s *theatrum mundi*.

Shakespearean Character as Cultural “Mirror”: A Coda

I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so.

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, June 24, 1827

A.C. Bradley found in *Macbeth* more of a “Sophoclean irony” than anywhere else in Shakespeare, meaning by such irony an augmenting awareness in the audience far exceeding the protagonist’s consciousness that perpetually he is saying one thing, and meaning more than he himself understands in what he says. I agree with Bradley that *Macbeth* is the masterpiece of Shakespearean irony, which transcends dramatic, or Sophoclean, irony.

— Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (528)

In contemporary culture, Shakespeare’s characters have outgrown the plays that contain them. Falstaff, Hamlet, Cleopatra: Their capacity for extemporaneous self-making seems to exceed the narrow, linear action inscribed in their plots. I’m taking that insight from Harold Bloom, who declares that Shakespeare “invents us.”¹² There’s a germ of truth in

¹²Citing Bloom’s *Western Canon* (733), Joe Barnhart writes of self-inventive powers of Shakespearean character, which separates them from their classical/medieval precursors: “The new (or transforming) self often differs from the old by becoming more intensely conscious. Transformation is a move both forward and inward. In the undiscovered regions of the self, invention takes place with no hard line drawn between self-discovery and self-invention” (367–68).

that brash declaration.¹³ We need, however, to historicize such a claim, since Shakespeare’s continuing cultural importance proceeds from his own historic moment. I’m assuming that Shakespeare’s plays record aspects of European culture’s transit from late medievalism to early modernism. And, in that transit, our species evolved in its social psychology—specifically, in its experience of the self.¹⁴

As I’ve noted, we “see” and “know” self, world, and other through various masks; yet there are moments when cultural forces seem to gather their strength within one particular archetype, or character, or persona, or mask (call it what you will). Historically within Western literary culture, each epoch (Williams) has its cast of characters serving in various roles. But, within each epoch, certain masks emerge most strongly: these “do the work of culture,” if I may use that phrase (see Lanier 97). That is, they provide the interpretive/judicial/ethical/aesthetic frame through which we “see” and “know” self, world, and other.

The history of Shakespearean criticism demonstrates that, from the Romantic Age (late 18th century) through the mid-20th century, the character of Hamlet predominated. We might wonder why it was Hamlet who provided Western culture with its “mirror.” There’s an irony, after all, in Hamlet’s representation of Romantic individualism at a time when modernist forces of alienation—social, economic, political—were arraying against “the sovereign individual.” From Goethe through Coleridge to that “last of the Romantics,” Harold Bloom, the figure of Hamlet represented, not simply the psychology of the “divided self,” but also the sense of alienation inscribed within “the modern condition.” Freud was “invented” (in Bloomian terms) to minister to the Hamlets of the world from the *fin de siècle* 19th century into mid-20th century.¹⁵ And through the first

¹³As Garber (hardly a Bloom aficionado) writes, “not only was the study of Shakespeare’s characters, from very early days, virtually equivalent to the study of Shakespeare, but it also seems as if the characters in effect preceded and then exceeded the plays, proving that Shakespeare knew human nature better than human nature knew itself” (*Character* 17).

¹⁴In this respect, it’s not Bloom but Martin Hollis whom I’d quote: “[It is only] with [Roman] legal ideas about rights, Christian ideas about the soul, and Cartesian ideas about the ego that our modern, categorial self is born” (223). Actually, Hamlet carries the literary representation of selfhood beyond the self-knowing Cartesian ego. Though “hidden” in its interiority, Descartes’s *cogito* is grounded in an experience of self-presence. In contrast, Shakespeare’s Hamlet experiences an alterity within the self, thus complicating and destabilizing the self-present, self-knowing Cartesian *cogito*. Against the Cartesian “hidden self,” the Hamlet-self is “divided” as well as “hidden.” Hence, from the 18th century through the age of Romanticism and onto the 20th century (with its development of depth psychology), Hamlet became the literary-cultural archetype of the modern self.

¹⁵Sir Lawrence Olivier begins his 1948 film adaptation with the non-Shakespearean voice-over, “This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind” (Olivier). Such an interpolation is meant “to explain” the thematics of a production rather thickly layered over with Freudian implications. Beyond Ernest Jones’s book, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949), it’s a commonplace that Freud gained insight into his theory of the Oedipus complex from his own reading of *Hamlet*. I’m agnostic as to the presence of Oedipal conflict in Hamlet’s psyche; from my perspective, there are other, more cogent ways to interpret Hamlet’s melancholy and seeming paralysis of will. The passage—

I do not know
Why yet I live to say “This thing’s to do,”
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do’t. (4.4.43–46)

—gives an insight to Hamlet’s self-division. The fact that he “live[s] to say” these words implies possession of a knowledge that he cannot yet speak or admit to himself: Specifically, that “do[ing]” “This thing” (which amounts to the assassination of Denmark’s duly elected king, irrespective of how Claudius came

five decades of the 20th century, with its wars and economic depression, the high-Romantic Hamlet seemed to deflect some (not all) attention away from the faceless machinery of high modernism. Hamlet came to represent a proto-Romantic figure in an age of technology harnessed to the global politics of war. And when those technologies exploded in an atomic blast over Hiroshima, and when near-skeletal survivors walked out of the Nazi death camps, the age of Hamlet-as-cultural-mirror came to an end. Hamlet's inwardness, self-doubt, and skepticism no longer mirrored the world that the war's survivors found themselves in. It was in Lear, now, that Western culture found its mirror. Garber notes this shift: "In the late 1950s and '60s, [...] the 'meaning' of Lear [...] began to change in response to cataclysmic world events like the exploding of the hydrogen bomb, political turmoil in Eastern Europe and Cuba, [...] and the start of the Vietnam War" (*Shakespeare*, "King Lear"). The play then "became Shakespeare's bleakest and most despairing vision of suffering, all hints of consolation undermined or denied" ("King Lear").¹⁶

So, from the self-divided, self-doubting Hamlet, we proceeded to Shakespeare's horrific image of holocaust-sacrifice, King Lear, whose desecrated kingly image carried popular culture from Auschwitz and Hiroshima through the second half of the 20th century. And now, almost a quarter-way through the 21st century, we might speculate on the possibility of another cultural mirror emerging at this time: that of Macbeth. This is speculation on my part. But there's something in the character of Macbeth that speaks to our own present moment; more so, one might argue, than Shakespeare's other tragic archetypes. That "something" has to do with power and, hence, with politics. This theme is by no means unique to Macbeth. Of course, there's Julius Caesar and Coriolanus and Richard III: power overwhelms their persons, as well. But, of the great characters of the "great tragedies"—Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth—it's Macbeth whose world invokes the seductions of tyrannical power that, increasingly, has come to mark our own moment in history.

To be fair, Trump was not the first U.S. president to face impeachment, nor was he the first to conceal an extramarital affair. The American Shakespeare scholar, Stephen

to the throne)—is no less than the prince's own death sentence. As often happens in Shakespearean soliloquy (Hirsh 312–14), Hamlet is indulging in some self-deception. A part of him does know the cause of his delay; repression (à la Freud) is operant here. And can we blame him? To give voice to the thought that he here fights to repress—"I am going to my death"—would be soul-crushing.

If Hamlet gives us a fully realized representation of the (early-)modern self, then what makes him modern is his sense of self-division, wherein aspects of the self are "hidden," not just from others but from his own ego-consciousness. Compared to Sophocles's Oedipus, Hamlet's self-division marks a Copernican revolution in our understanding/experience of selfhood. To the extent that we experience the self within these same categories, we can say that Hamlet introduces us to ourselves. He fascinates us, because he mirrors our struggle in self-understanding, our longing to discover our own hidden faces.

And no wonder that he fascinates us, just as his character has fascinated prior generations. For, like Coleridge, we all "have a smack of Hamlet."

¹⁶This, then, is the mid-20th century context in which King Lear came to be read: "After two world wars and Auschwitz," writes Maynard Mack, "our sensibility is significantly more in touch than our grandparents' was with the play's jagged violence, its sadism, madness, and procession of deaths, its wild blends of levity and horror, selfishness and self-lessness" ("King Lear"). The arguments within this paragraph are developed in my previous essay. See, Baumlin, James S. "King Lear, Mandel's *Station Eleven*, and the Shakespearean Apocalypse: Meditations on Pandemic and Posthumanism." *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2020, pp. 13–33.

Greenblatt, tells the following of Bill Clinton, the 42nd U.S. president and husband to Hillary, Trump’s 2016 political rival:

In 1998, a friend of mine, Robert Pinsky, who at the time was serving as the poet laureate of the United States, invited me to a poetry evening at the Clinton White House, one of a series of black-tie events organized to mark the coming millennium. On this occasion the President gave an amusing introductory speech in which he recalled that his first encounter with poetry came in junior high school when his teacher made him memorize certain passages from *Macbeth*. This was, Clinton remarked wryly, not the most auspicious beginning for a life in politics.

After the speeches, I joined the line of people waiting to shake the President’s hand [...]. This was a moment when rumors of the Lewinsky affair were circulating, but before the whole thing had blown up into the grotesque national circus that it soon became. “Mr. President,” I said, sticking out my hand, “don’t you think that *Macbeth* is a great play about an immensely ambitious man who feels compelled to do things that he knows are politically and morally disastrous?” Clinton looked at me for a moment, still holding my hand, and said, “I think *Macbeth* is a great play about someone whose immense ambition has an ethically inadequate object.”

I was astonished by the aptness, as well as the quickness, of this comment, so perceptively in touch with *Macbeth*’s anguished brooding about the impulses that are driving him to seize power by murdering Scotland’s legitimate ruler. (“Shakespeare”)

We are now a quarter-way through the 21st century. Of the great characters in the “great tragedies,” it’s *Macbeth* whose world explores the crisis of unrestrained power and its human consequences; and it’s that world that, increasingly, intrudes on our reflections upon our own moment in history. Elsewhere, Greenblatt has written that *Macbeth* is Shakespeare’s “most mature and considered attempt *to understand what it felt like* to be a tyrant” (*Tyrant* 109; emphasis added). As the players in our contemporary *theatrum mundi* teach us, it’s an exhilarating feeling, dangerous and addictive. So we might ask: In our seeming drift toward political amorality, autocracy, and personality-cultism, is ours an age of *Macbeth*?

The answer depends, I think, upon our reading of the play and its ironies. For Lady *Macbeth*, the purchase price of tyrannical power is madness; for her husband, it’s despair:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5.19–28)

Macbeth's soliloquy is nothing less than a world history of lives wasted in pursuit of power. I'd so much like to project the faces of our own tyrants-du-jour (both de facto and wannabe: Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, the cult of Trump) upon the person of that "poor player / [...] strut[ting] and fret[ting] his hour upon the stage." Even more, I'd like for that player's time on stage—that is, in our own *theatrum mundi*—to end quickly. An hour of their strutting is, to me, too long.

What separates Shakespeare's tragic villain from today's Politician is, once again, an emotional/moral intelligence marked by a capacity for self-reflection. From the moment of the witches' prophesying, Macbeth has been his own audience, witness, and judge; and, throughout, he has recoiled in horror at his own actions, all performed in pursuit of a crown that could never rightfully be his. Paradoxically, Macbeth's mental/emotional suffering shows his humanity, though diseased and tormented; today's Politician, in contrast, remains little more than a cartoon, unconscious of the ironies surrounding their character, words, and actions.

Here, I'm writing specifically of the American political scene. If ours is, indeed, an age of Macbeth, then perhaps our plotline remains in Act 1 or 2. A political coup was attempted back in January 2021, and some of its leaders have been brought to trial. On either side of the nation's political divide, no one has been hanged (as threatened) or assassinated, yet.¹⁷ In the meantime, the strutting and fretting continues. As the 2024 elections proceed, we seem to be building toward an Act 3 climax, though the crisis has yet to be reached. There's more to unfold, and we don't know how the fifth act will end, whether comically, heroically, or tragically.

While meditating thus on our own historic moment, I await Trump's New York state jury verdict.



¹⁷Here, too, is an irony of Shakespearean proportion. During the January 6 coup attempt, rioters had erected a makeshift gallows near the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building. "Hang Mike Pence! Hang Mike Pence!" became their chant, aiming to prevent Trump's "treasonous" vice president from ratifying the 2020 Electoral College results and declaring Joe Biden winner. The "treason," however, was not Pence's; it belonged to the rioters who had staged their coup on the Capitol steps.

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