

**In response to** James S. Baumlin’s “‘The Shakespearean Moment’ in American Popular/Political Culture: Editorializing in an Age of Trump”<sup>1</sup>

## The “Truly Shakespearean” Trump: Reading Fascism in *Project 2025*

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As they struggle to report on our abnormal times, American news reporters and television newscasters have regularly invoked the name of Shakespeare, declaring this or that MAGA-Trumpian act “almost Shakespearean,” “Shakespearean,” or “truly Shakespearean.” In “‘The Shakespearean Moment’ in American Popular/Political Culture,” James S. Baumlin explores the underlying rhetoric. As Baumlin writes, there’s something “vague yet somehow apt” in the term:

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 intend[s] 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 [...]. 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. (2.29)

The “something more,” as Baumlin describes it, focuses less on actions of the age’s political “players” and more on the cultural/political role of their citizen-audiences. As Baumlin notes, “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” (2.32).

This makes sense, but there’s more still lurking in this deployment. A comment like “that’s truly Shakespearean” can be a shorthand for understanding a complex

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<sup>1</sup>Baumlin, James S. “‘The Shakespearean Moment’ in American Popular/ Political Culture: Editorializing in the Age of Trump.” *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 23 Jul. 2024, pp. 2.28–2.43, <https://ellids.com/archives/2024/07/6.1-Baumlin.pdf>.

political or social event, like the MAGA movement, which allows us to establish common ground, a starting point to an extended discussion. But it can also be a substitute, a tag line, that allows us to think we understand something we don’t want to think about. It can end discussion.

Baumlin’s article reminds me of a story my dissertation advisor told me. At the time, around 1975, he was a well-established scholar in his late forties, a grown man, and I was twenty-five, trying to figure out how to be an adult and an academic. He told me that, when things were going badly in the Department of English, five or six of the faculty met in someone’s basement to discuss a plot to overthrow the department head. I don’t remember the details, but the plot failed and made a bad situation worse. As he told the story, I remember thinking: Two of the professors in the room taught courses in Shakespeare. Everyone else had read Shakespeare. Everyone was smart. Still, they all seemed incapable of predicting that their silly little plot would not end well. They couldn’t see that they were doing their own community theater version of *Julius Caesar*.

We all believe that we can learn from literature. Even Ron DeSantis, arch-conservative governor of Florida, believes this, and that is precisely why he is banning books.<sup>2</sup> It would be wonderful if we consistently learned from books, but we don’t. Not even smart professors of literature. Not even professors of history. Not even graduates from Ivy League institutions, like Donald J. Trump and J.D. Vance.<sup>3</sup> Uwe Wittstock’s *February 1933: The Winter of Literature* (2023) chronicles the failure of German writers and intellectuals to derail the rise of Nazism. Some didn’t see it coming. Some understood what was happening but were ineffective in resisting it.

Maybe this is because we don’t read the texts of contemporary political culture in the right way. Shakespeare, as arguably the world’s most esteemed writer, is going to be misread—and misquoted—more often than not. One of my favorite scenes in Joyce’s *Ulysses* is when Mr. Deasy, Stephen Dedalus’s dull-witted schoolmaster, is lecturing him about why the poet is always broke:

—Because you don’t save, Mr. Deasy said, pointing his finger. You don’t know yet what money is. Money is power, when you have lived as long as I have. I know, I know. If youth but knew. But what does Shakespeare say? *Put but money in thy purse.*

—Iago. Stephen muttered. (30)

Unlike Mr. Deasy, Stephen notes the irony in taking advice from a malicious, murderous man. We say “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” without remembering that

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<sup>2</sup>According to the National Free Speech Movement, there were 3,362 instances of book bannings during the 2022–23 school year, an increase of 33 percent. See, Soule, Douglas. “Florida Is the Nation’s Book Banning Leader.” *Tallahassee Democrat*, 21 Sep. 2023, [www.tallahassee.com/story/news/politics/2023/09/21/ron-desantis-florida-is-no-1-in-book-banning-free-speech-group-says/70900798007/](http://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/politics/2023/09/21/ron-desantis-florida-is-no-1-in-book-banning-free-speech-group-says/70900798007/). Among the books banned in Florida, the most related to LGBTQ issues (26 percent) and race issues (30 percent). See, Granieri, Susanna. “Three Laws Signed by DeSantis at the Center of Florida’s Surge in Book Bans.” *First Amendment Watch*, 2 Jun. 2023, <https://firstamendmentwatch.org/three-laws-signed-by-desantis-at-the-center-of-floridas-surge-in-book-bans/>.

<sup>3</sup>Trump was awarded a BS in Economics from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, in 1968. Vance was awarded a JD from Yale University School of Law in 2013.

Romeo and Juliet died because they had different family names.<sup>4</sup> We say “Give every man thy ear; but few thy voice” and forget that Polonius, who utters this phrase, is one of the worse political advisors in all of Shakespeare.<sup>5</sup> Unlike most of us, Stephen Dedalus understands a Shakespearean quote within the context of an entire play—within its own complex world, rife with ironies.

As I read Baumlin’s essay, I am also reminded of an exchange between German-American political philosopher, Hannah Arendt and German-Swiss psychiatrist, Karl Jaspers, shortly after World War II, when they were on opposite sides of the Atlantic. They were both struggling with how to understand Nazi Germany, how to assign blame for the Holocaust, and how to prevent history from repeating itself. Jaspers had sent a copy of *The Question of German Guilt* to Arendt.<sup>6</sup> On August 17, 1946, Arendt wrote to Jaspers: “We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue” (Kohler and Saner 54). On October 19, Jaspers responded:

You say what the Nazis did cannot be comprehended as “crime”—I’m not altogether comfortable with your view; because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of “greatness”—of satanic greatness—which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the “demonic” element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that’s what truly characterizes them. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria. I regard any hint of myth and legend with horror, and everything unspecific is just such a hint [...]. The way you do express it, you’ve almost taken the path of poetry. And a Shakespeare would never be able to give adequate form to this material—his instinctive aesthetic sense would lead to a falsification of it—and that’s why he couldn’t attempt it. (62)

Jaspers offers a stark warning: We can never understand massive cultural trauma, like the Holocaust, through any “myth,” “legend,” or “path of poetry.” Any attempt at aestheticizing Nazism effectively erases its horror. Or, rather, any attempt at representing that horror in its fullness would necessarily turn audiences into witnesses—some as collaborators, some as survivors—who must turn away from the guilt-ridden spectacle, disgusted and ashamed.

Arendt continued to think about Jaspers’s response. In 1961, when writing about the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, Arendt would herself use the phrase, “the banality of evil” to describe the role of the bureaucratic Eichmann as “mastermind” of the Holocaust. She was widely criticized for using the phrase, perhaps by people who wanted more of a narrative, a “hint of myth and legend.” Is the Holocaust, Jaspers and Arendt might ask, beyond human understanding, beyond narrative, beyond even the genius of Shakespeare?

In our own times, could *Project 2025*—a Heritage Foundation plan to bureaucratize Christian nationalism by replacing politically-neutral federal employees

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<sup>4</sup>*Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene 2.

<sup>5</sup>*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 3.

<sup>6</sup>Published in German as *Die Schuldfrage* (Schneider, 1946). Published in English as *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Dial Press, 1947).

with Trump loyalists—be read “in a Shakespearean manner”?<sup>7</sup> Can we read it in ways that disclose its underlying fascist narrative? Or does such a text, in all its banality, resist ironizing?

In *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump: A Psychological Reckoning* (2020), Dan P. McAdams, who studies narrative identity, writes that Trump is incapable of telling a story about himself, something that most children can do by age five or six. He is, as McAdams terms it, an “episodic man”:

He moves through life, episode by episode, from one battle to the next, striving, in turn, to win each battle he fights. The episodes do not add up. They do not build to form a narrative arc. There is no life story, at least not the kind of coherent and integrative narrative identity that psychologists like me expect a life to convey. (20)

Could even Shakespeare write a tragedy about a man who is living an incoherent, non-narrative life without distorting the reality of it? What *mythos* can capture the full danger of such a man?

I desperately want to believe that literature, philosophy, and history can help us to form a stronger and more equitable democracy. In *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Walt Whitman wrote that America did not yet have a democracy. To become a true democracy, we need to develop individuals who could fully participate in democracy, including women (455–501). He felt that the right kind of literature would help develop the democratic self. We have no shortage of writers who are currently focused on trying to save our democracy—even a weak form of it. We certainly need to understand the existential threat of our times, and we need to know how to act to preserve democratic institutions and values.

What we are not doing, as writers, is reflecting on how we are writing about this moment in history. We know how to convince readers who already agree with us. I am more interested in having an impact on hardcore MAGAs who construct an entire world, which is only fully realized within the mob of a Trump rally, to protect their view of Trump. Is there a form of art or rhetoric that can produce even a bit of irony or doubt or caution in hardcore MAGAs?



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<sup>7</sup>The Heritage Foundation’s *Project 2025* has four pillars: (1) “Mandate for Leadership,” which is “a vision of conservative success at each federal agency during the next administration,” a document of over 900 pages, (2) a “Conservative LinkedIn,” an online database of vetted conservatives who might serve as political appointees, (3) the “Presidential Administrative Academy,” a series of videos designed to train political appointees, and (4) a playbook or “implementation plan.” See, “Project 2025.” *The Heritage Foundation*, 31 Jan. 2023, [www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/project-2025](http://www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/project-2025). For a critique of *Project 2025*, see, “Project 2025, Explained,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, [www.aclu.org/project-2025-explained](http://www.aclu.org/project-2025-explained).

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