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Introduction to *Rome in Shakespeare's Tragedies* by De Lorenzo. How Shakespearean Material was appropriated by Translators and Scholars during the Fascist Period.

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Abstract

What follows is a prefatory commentary and an English translation of the critical introduction to the text Roma nelle tragedie di Shakespeare (Rome in Shakespeare's Tragedies) published in Italy in 1924. The book contains the translations of Julius Caesar and Coriolanus, both carried out by Ada Salvatore, and an introductory essay written by Giuseppe De Lorenzo. Our aim in translating the introductory essay by De Lorenzo is to raise awareness among non-Italian speaking scholars of how Shakespearian material was appropriated through translation by translators and intellectuals during the Fascist era.

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Translators' introduction

The contexts of European nationalism have been marked by frequent attempts to appropriate the capital of Shakespearean literature to national traditions, in apparent conflict with its English/British origins. For example, HOENSELAARS (2009: 9) articulates the familiar claim that German scholarship of the Romantic period saw Shakespeare's Saxon affinities place him in closer alignment with the values of the German nation than modern Britain, a view which is felt to be vindicated by the prominence that Shakespearean literature, notably its translations, held in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movements to establish a national German literature (for an overview, see MACEY 1971). The crux of such an argument is the claim that the Anglophone world's single-language engagement with Shakespeare pales in comparison to the multifaceted close-readings that the German age of translations produced, and the complementary claim that Shakespeare scholarship in English has been a development of the German tradition rather than a local extension of British engagements.

The modern Anglophone scholar, for whom Shakespeare is an unambiguously English property, may feel some difficulty with this claim, not that German culture has an *equivalent* claim to Shakespearean literature, but rather that it may have a *superior* claim. Such an argument challenges the ideological foundations of how we study literature, particularly where the Anglophone scholarship of Shakespeare has been conditioned by a heritage that aligns it with colonialism and empire (SINFIELD 1994: 173). While some may treat alternative claims of ownership of Shakespeare by continental European powers with scepticism, it is worth noting that Shakespeare emerged from a pre-nationalist world order, and that the British or Anglophone ownership of Shakespeare may be treated with a comparable degree of scepticism. Investigations of national traditions of Shakespeare outside of Britain, incorporating those of Europe and North America, are valuable, not only for the new insights they offer in relation to how Shakespeare may be read, but also for how they supply insights into the circulations of culture that predate the formation of national identities, but which reflect their inevitable emergence.

Less well-known than the German claims on Shakespeare's social capital are the arguments that place him in alignment with the nationalist ideals of Italian Fascism in the early 1920s. Such arguments are articulated at length in Giuseppe De Lorenzo's critical introduction to the 1924 publication of *Roma nella tragedie di Shakespeare: Giulio Cesare, Coriolano* (1924).¹ De Lorenzo's essay illustrates how the ideological matter of Shakespearean drama is invested with sufficient ambiguity that it is not only adaptable to a variety of cultural affinities; it may also be employed to support a range of modern political stances. The choice of the two plays *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* to be translated and published as a single volume in 1924 in Italy is significant, as is made clear by De Lorenzo's introduction, which argues that the former play encapsulates the spirit of ancient Rome, and that the latter champions the emergence of the modern fascist ideal, where society operates under the guidance of the powerful military leader or *duce*. As Alessandra Calvani points out:

[S]e la traduzione rispecchia sempre, almeno in parte, nella scelta dei testi e nei contenuti l'ambiente politico e sociale che l'ha resa possibile, ecco che la scelta del 1924 assume un significato: il 1924, l'anno che vede l'ufficializzazione del regime fascista, con la sua 'romanità' e l'esaltazione del suo 'duce', non poteva che produrre versioni dei drammi romani di Shakespeare. (CALVANI 2010: 7)

¹ We are grateful to Dr. Michela Barisonzi for her advice on the literature on Gabriele D'annunzio relevant for this article.

[if translation always reflects, at least in part, in the choice of the texts and their content, the political and social environment which made the translation possible, then the choice of the year 1924 acquires meaning: 1924 is the year when the fascist regime was officialised, and its 'romanity' and the glorification of its 'duce' (leader) could not but produce versions of Shakespeare's Roman tragedies (translation by Tarantini)].

Coriolanus is clearly an important Shakespearean text for the articulation of fascist ideology in Italy at this time: no less than three new translations emerged in quick succession, namely by Laura TORRETTA (1924), Emma BOGHEN-CONIGLIANI (1925), and Ada SALVATORE (De Lorenzo's essay is an introduction to the latter). However, De Lorenzo's arguments do not rely solely on the familiar claim that the play is proto-Fascist in its ideals, a claim that has been both articulated and critiqued from a number of perspectives through the twentieth century (see HEINEMANN 1994: 245, HOLLAND 2013: 19–22); rather, they employ a more sustained examination of the influence of Italian culture on Shakespeare, drawing both from the example of ancient Rome, which is heavily present in the tragedies, and modern Italy, which is even more powerfully present in the comedies. Such arguments, whatever their immediate political purpose, may prompt a fertile rereading of Shakespearean drama, highlighting a range of philosophical and narrative influences that reach far beyond the enclosed sphere of the English language.

To begin, De Lorenzo offers a compelling statistical breakdown of Shakespearean drama, identifying plays that use Italian settings, characters or philosophical ideas, and demonstrating that Italy is more present in Shakespeare than Britain itself, which dominates only the history cycles, appearing only intermittently in the tragedies (*King Lear*, *Macbeth*), and even less in the comedies (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*). De Lorenzo's arguments are passionately expressed, utilising a fluid rhetoric that supports a vision of Shakespeare as a writer driven by the lessons of Latin literature, and distinguished by his capacity to apply them imaginatively across a range of historical and dramatic contexts. This is aptly supported with reading of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, which offer the tragic protagonists as embodiments of the "stoic" ideal. However, when the focus of the essay shifts to the second play in the volume, *Coriolanus*, there is a corresponding ideological shift, wherein the Roman ideal that drives Shakespeare's work is appropriated to the contemporary political climate. As we have suggested above, *Coriolanus* has been consistently identified as containing plausibly pro-Fascist/conservative ideals, particularly in wartime contexts (HOLLAND 2013: 19–21); in this essay, we are exposed to reasoning that positions the

play as a partial source for the construction of these ideals. While the traditional readings of Martius as “hard and unyielding” or “irrational and violent” are certainly present in De Lorenzo’s analysis, they are juxtaposed with the greatness of spirit embodied in his heroism, and which is recounted in numerous quoted speeches from the play. However, what is perhaps emphasised with more vigour is the theme of the “cowardice” and “baseness” of the world, in which context the hero’s attempts to grasp the reins of history are all the more noble. Although an erudite range of source materials, ancient and modern, is present throughout, the second half of the essay favours materials by then contemporary authors such as D’Annunzio, whose relationship with fascism is to this very day controversial (for an in-depth analysis on the topic, see HUGHES-HALLET 2013, BARBIERI SQUAROTTI 1982). It even draws upon a newspaper column by Rudyard Kipling written in praise of the modern Italian soldier. Although Kipling’s description of “the precise way in which they [the soldiers] strike their feet on the ground, and at every step seem to take possession of it” (our translation, French in the original) may seem relatively innocuous in the context of a discussion of Shakespeare’s Roman plays, it certainly strikes an ominous note in relation to the rise of European militarism over the decades that followed.

Translation does not take place in a vacuum; as Bassnett and Lefevere (1990: 11) claim, “[t]here is always a context in which translation takes place”, and the translator operates within a social structure. “Translations thus always reflect the historical and cultural conditions under which they have been produced” (WOLF 2011: 3), and Ada Salvatore’s translation and De Lorenzo’s introductory essay are to be seen through the lens of the Italian social and cultural milieu, as well as the political situation of the time. Hatim and Mason claim that a translation can be assessed in terms of “degrees of *mediation*, that is, the extent to which translators intervene in the transfer process, feeding their knowledge and beliefs into their processing of a text” (HATIM AND MASON 1997: 147, original emphasis). The degree of intervention is to be seen, among other things, in lexical and stylistic choices. As it is easy to infer, in all the three Italian translations of *Coriolanus* published between 1924 and 1925, terms with heavy connotative values are omnipresent.² The most striking example of what Hatim and Mason (1997: 153) define “maximal mediation” is to be found in the

² The version by Laura Torretta (1924) is politically less connoted than the other two, but words such as “proletarian” (*proletari*, 14), “blue collars” (*operai*, 135) and “workers” (*lavoratori*, 136), and also “comrades” (*compagni*, 33, 37, 41, 80, 97, 137) are to be found. The version by Boghen-Conigliani (1925) can be read as fascist, and the word *camerata* (comrade, with right-wing connotation) is recurrent (25, 92, 167, 187, 189) (CALVANI 2010: 8).

translation by Ada Salvatore, for which De Lorenzo wrote the introductory essay we have translated:

<p><i>Coriolanus:</i> Hail, lords! I am return'd your soldier, No more infected with my country's love Than when I parted hence, but still subsisting Under your great command. You are to know That prosperously I have attempted and With bloody passage led your wars even to The gates of Rome.</p> <p>(<i>Coriolanus</i>, V, v, 71-77)</p>	<p><i>Coriolano:</i> Salute, signori! Ecco di ritorno il vostro guerriero: egli torna non più preso dall'amore della sua patria che non lo fosse quando se ne allontanò; ma tuttora pronto ai vostri ordini. Occorre che voi sappiate che ho intrapreso con successo la <u>marcia su Roma</u> ed ho guidato attraverso un sanguinoso cammino i vostri eserciti alle porte di essa</p> <p>(translation by Ada Salvatore 1924: 123, our emphasis).</p>
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Back translation: You are to know / That prosperously I have undertaken the **March on Rome** and / With bloody passage led your wars even to / its gates.

The reference to the insurrection by which Mussolini came to power on 28th October 1922 is quite obvious. The representation of the strong Roman leader pleased the fascist regime, and the tragedy of *Coriolanus* lent itself to the “manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose” (HERMANS 1985: 11). The extent of the manipulation of the source text carried out by Ada Salvatore would be difficult to convey, as it would require a meticulous back translation and/or a detailed analysis of the Italian version.³ We have chosen, instead, to focus on the introductory essay by De Lorenzo, since we believe it is an even more blatant specimen of the cultural appropriation and violence⁴ exerted on Shakespearean material by the Italian *intelligentsia* of the time, of which non-Italian speaking scholars might be less aware. By translating De Lo-

³ For a detailed analysis, CALVANI (2010).

⁴ For an extensive discussion on the concept of appropriation in translation, SAGLIA (2002). The notion of violence of translation is VENUTI's (2010).

renzo's essay we aim to show how powerful the translation's ideology (TYMOCZKO 2010)⁵ was in the context of Italian Fascism.

Introduction to Rome in Shakespeare's Tragedies⁶

Shakespeare was born, as we all know, on 22nd April (the Julian calendar) 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, where he died on 23rd April 1616.

One of the greatest scholars of Shakespeare's work, the Dane Georg Brandes, noted that Shakespeare was born in the same year that Michelangelo died, and died on almost the same day that Cervantes died. Michelangelo painted and sculpted mighty demi-gods in the agony of solitary grandeur: his bleak lyricism and tragic sublimity is matched by no one. The finest creations of Cervantes are monuments of a high comedy that defined an epoch in the world's literature. Shakespeare equals Michelangelo in *pathos* and Cervantes in *humour*: this is the measure of his immense grandeur.

Brandes himself, in *William Shakespeare: a critical study*, London 1911, p. 341, says that Denmark owes its universal renown principally to *Hamlet*. Of all Danes, only one can be said to be truly famous; just one, with whom the thoughts of all Europeans, Americans, Australians, Asians and Africans are engaged; and one that never really existed, or at least not as the world knows him. Denmark has produced many notable men, Tycho Brahe, Thorwaldsen, Andersen, but none of them has reached one thousandth of the fame of Hamlet: critical readings of *Hamlet* exceed in number the populations of some small European nations.

If such is indeed Shakespeare's greatness, with Denmark owing him so much for just one, even if amongst the greatest, of his works, how much will Italy, the source or inspiration of the greater part of his immortal world of souls, owe him? Others have studied and written meticulously about the real and historical relationships between Shakespeare and Italy and Italian culture: let us for a moment stop and reflect instead upon the ideal relations directly accessible in Shakespeare's works, between the world's eye⁷ and Italy, the object of his contemplation and the source material of his constructions.

⁵ According to Maria Tymoczko (2010: 217) a "translation's ideology" is determined only in part by the source text, and much more by "the place of enunciation of the translator – both the ideological positioning and the geographical and temporal positioning – [...]" in relation to the target audience.

⁶ All the footnotes are translators' notes. All the references to Shakespeare's plays (i.e. act, scene, verse) are absent in the Italian text, and have been added by the translators.

⁷ Quote from Sonnet 69, l. 1

First, let us look at the statistics. Of the thirty-seven dramatic works by Shakespeare, one, *Hamlet*, has a Danish setting. Two, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *As you like it*, are French. Four, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens* and *Pericles*, are Greek, even if the main character of the latter, Marina, recalls Italy with her name. Four, *The Comedy of Errors*, *All's well that ends well*, *Measure for Measure* and *Cymbeline*, use diverse settings but feature Italian sources and elements. Thirteen, that is to say the ten History plays, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, are plainly English. Thirteen, that is to say *Titus Andronicus*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* are fundamentally Italian. To that, let us add that, of the two poems, *Venus and Adonis* is of Ovid's inspiration (just like *Titania* in *Midsummer-Night's Dream*) and *The Rape of Lucrece* is intimately Italian. Furthermore, the famous sonnets, which are of Petrarchan inspiration and are analogous to Michelangelo's, frequently evoke Italic or Latinate remembrances, like the famous sonnet LV:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of Princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme; (ll. 1-2)

Where the verses of Ovid are echoed:

*Jamque opus exegi, quod nec Jovis ira, nec ignis,
Nec poterit ferrum, nec edax abolere vetustas;*

And now my work is done; which not Jove's wrath,
Nor fire, nor sword, nor all-consuming age
Can e'er destroy.⁸

And the more famous ones by Horace:

Exegi monumentum aere perennius.

I have raised a monument more permanent than bronze (III.30)⁹

Already these unembellished statistics reveal how in Shakespeare's work the portion given to Italy conspicuously prevails over all others, even the national English sub-

⁸ FOWLER (1903: 150-54)

⁹ HORACE / CONINGTON (1882)

ject. Shakespeare loved and adored Italy, both the ancient Roman one and the contemporary Renaissance one: through the blooming of the Italian culture in Elizabethan England; through the Latin literature he was taught, and which he learnt as an autodidact; but most of all through an intimate and innate elective affinity. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, dated 1591, was Shakespeare's first love declaration to Italy: a love that would become the deepest passion of his life. It now appears certain that, in 1593, he travelled to Northern Italy. The opening verses of the first scene of *The Taming of the Shrew* ...

...since for the great desire I had
To see fair Padua, nursery of arts,
I am arrived for fruitful Lombardy,
The pleasant garden of great Italy (1.1.1–4)¹⁰

... sound like a memory of his trip and evoke the landscape he has seen. Italy lives unperishingly in his immortal works, not only the regions that in all probability he did see, but also those lands that he never saw. The venerable Italian cities, Milan, Verona, Mantua, Padua, Venice, Florence, Naples, Misenum, Messina, Syracuse, and most of all Rome, as well as the Roman countryside, are immortalised in Shakespeare's plays. Even when the scene is set in Vienna, as in *Measure for Measure*, or in Illyria, as in *Twelfth Night*, the names of the characters, either invented or drawn from Italian novellas, immediately recall Italy: Vincenzo, Angelo, Claudio, Lucio, Varrio, Pompeo, Isabella, Mariana, Juliet (Giulietta), Francesca and Orsino [sic], Valentine, Antonio, Curio, Fabian (Fabiano), Olivia, Viola and Maria.

But SHAKESPEARE, like Michelangelo, is not a landscape painter. Therefore, the cities for him are but the background against which the characters and human passions unfold. And what human passions he set in the sacred land of Italy! *Magna parens virum!*¹¹

First of all, music, the purest expression of human affection by which Shakespeare is always so intimately penetrated, appears more evidently in all the Italian plays; as if in Shakespeare's mind music could not be separated from Italy. It suffices to recall the celestial music of Ariel in *The Tempest*, or the dialogues between Orsino and Viola in *Twelfth Night*, or Lorenzo's conversation in the moonlight with Jessica, in *The*

¹⁰ All quotes and citations from Shakespeare here reproduced are from the online texts of the Folger Shakespeare Digital Text: <http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/?chapter=4> (15.12.2019).

¹¹ "Great parent of men" (our translation).

Merchant of Venice. In this last scene, Launcelot precedes the musicians, singing in Italian: "Sola! sola! ... sola! sola!" (5.1.47); and Lorenzo exclaims:

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears; soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still choring to the young-eyed cherubins.
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it (5.1.62–73)

And Jessica replies with these profound words: "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" (5.1.77). This scene is all about the marvellous musical landscape of Italy. But, I repeat, it is not the landscapes, rather the characters and the human affections, which blaze and burn in Shakespeare's plays. Volumes would be required to list the qualities of the Italian characters that the poet has forged in bronze and gold in his immortal works: but the time required to write or read those volumes would be better used re-reading or re-listening to the voice of their creator directly. There are hundreds of Italian creatures, high or low, sweet or fierce, sad or joyful, beautiful or ugly, happy or unhappy, who by now live an immortal life in the verse of the poet, and who have spread the name and the soul of Italy across the orb of the earth. From the humble figure of Launce (in the early play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the first love declaration for Italy), who speaks to his dog and his shoe; passing by those wonderful souls, Juliet, Desdemona, Marina, Miranda; up to the dark abyss of Iago (almost a personification of Cesare Borgia, as Brandes notes) and to the spiritual summits of Brutus, Coriolanus, Julius Caesar: what a diverse and immense world of souls is germinated from the Italian soil through Shakespeare's genius!

The very native soil of England did not provide him with as much material for his creations as Italy did. I will not even speak of other countries! It suffices to note what he drew from ancient Greece, for which, as much as for Italy, he could have resorted to Plutarch. Greece inspired in him but two divine fantasies, *Midsummer-Night's Dream* and *Pericles*, and those two brutal satires, *Timon of Athens* and *Troilus and Cressida*. For this latter, Brandes felt justified in criticising Shakespeare, accusing him

of barbarism for not fully understanding the beauty of the *Iliad*, upon which he based that appalling parody. The only barbarian in this, *pace* Brandes, is Brandes himself! Shakespeare was in fact so far from barbarity that he was incapable of accepting anything primitive or savage in his vision. He loved to peer into the deepest bowers of human passion, and to follow human thought to its finest ramifications. In the hearts of his heroes there is such turmoil of passions that it seems to make the world explode, and such clamour of thoughts in their minds that it seems to invite madness. All of that would not be possible in a primitive, barbarian world. Consider what he brought forth from the primitive tales of Holinshed's chronicles and Saxo Grammaticus: King Lear, the reasoning madman, and Hamlet, the philosopher of philosophers! Even when his heroes are unmerciful and savage, like Macbeth and his wife, they too have in their complicated hearts conflicting passions and feelings, and in their subtle minds reserves of strength and complexity of thought, which gives them the power of reason until those same minds dissolve into madness and suicide.

Now, compared to this vast, complex and deep vision of life and the world, what could the *Iliad* represent? A wonderful poem, more than perfect in its form, but one that depicts the gestures of primitive men, simple and fierce, to whom all higher thoughts and feelings, those of superior order, were totally alien: no love, no mercy, no self-abnegation, no sacrifice, no reflection on the pain of the world. Those heroes, wonderful, but "With too much blood and too little brain" (*Troilus* 5.1.49) could not find grace with the author of *Troilus and Cressida*. After all, long before Shakespeare, the figures of Greek mythology had already found themselves vulnerable to the caricature of Aristophanes.

What remains is beauty, the immortal beauty of Greek art, which Shakespeare supposedly did not understand. But in my opinion it is not that he didn't understand it: it is that beauty for beauty's sake, art for art's sake, had little value for Shakespeare. Even in this he is similar to his Titan brother Michelangelo. For Shakespeare, as for Michelangelo, form is an outer garment, welcome when beautiful (and these two are unequalled in making it so), but negligible if it doesn't express the spasm, the tension and repose, of the moral element – intimate, inexpressible, elusive – which is the spirit and the essence of the universe: *Spiritus intus alit, mens agitat molem!*¹²

The ancient Greeks could not say much to Shakespeare's heart and mind: that is why he neglected them and addressed almost all of his love to the ancient Romans, and to their Italian heirs, even if degenerate. Those who, with their lives and their great per-

¹² The verse is from Vergil's Aeneid, Book VI, 726-7. The full citation is "spiritus intus alit, totamque infusa per artus mens agitat molem et magno se corpore miscet".

sonalities, could provide him with materials worthy to shape the wonderful world of passions and thoughts expressed by his characters.

Just as Greece is the unequalled parent of beauty, so Rome represents, indeed virtually encompasses, the moral order of the world. Shakespeare bowed, reverent and adoring, to this Rome, the brightest expression of the spiritual essence of the universe; so much so that, before retiring from his art, in his penultimate work, *Cymbeline*, he wanted to celebrate a desired alliance between Britain and Rome, with the wonderful vision of the setting Britannic sun, in whose beams, following ...

... il corso del ciel, ch'ella seguìo
dietro all'antico, che Lavinia tolse,¹³

... the eagle of Rome penetrates and plunges with its powerful flight.

Rome is therefore something like a magnetic north towards which Shakespeare's thought is primarily oriented. In my own book, *Shakespeare e il Dolore del Mondo*¹⁴ I tried, incidentally, to demonstrate how vast and profound the imprint of Rome on all of Shakespeare's works is. Let us consider the main threads through which this is demonstrated, by focusing mainly on two of his Roman tragedies, *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*.

The first of Shakespeare's Roman tragedies, *Titus Andronicus*, which he probably composed around 1586 under the influence of Marlowe, already clearly reveals this admiration for Rome; it will pervade all his work, starting from this russet dawn, to the culminating zenith of *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, and to the effulgent dusk of *Cymbeline*. Truly, it may be said of Shakespeare that everything great and beautiful in his work is, again, Roman, and for him the spirit of ancient Rome appears as the highest manifestation of humanity on earth. Even if he had little Latin and less Greek, as his contemporary Ben Jonson claimed, he depicted the spirit of ancient Rome with images that are superior to those of any other poet; not only in comparison to Ben Jonson's and Marlowe's, who had far superior education, but also to the work of our Italian poet Alfieri. As Ben Jonson said, he was the star of all poets, not just for an age, but for all time; and Goethe named him in 1820, the star of the greatest height: so, his vision, which saw other remote places and times, as well as an-

¹³ "Against the course of heaven, which it had followed / Behind the ancient who Lavinia took" (DANTE/WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW 1997: Canto 6 l. 2-3).

¹⁴ "Shakespeare and the pain of the world" Bologna, Zanichelli, 1922.

cient Rome, originated not from scholarship, but by virtue of his perfect and graceful eye looking beyond time and space.

The perfection of his eye is revealed, for example, in his conception of Julius Caesar, which he had expressed before writing the tragedy of the Roman dictator: the idea springs forth suddenly in his disturbing history of *Richard III*, composed in 1593. Here he puts the words in the mouth of the doomed young Edward, Prince of Wales:

That Julius Caesar was a famous man.
With what his valor did enrich his wit,
His wit set down to make his [valor] live.
Death makes no conquest of this conqueror,
For now he lives in fame, though not in life. (3.1.85–9)

These wonderful words, which are the most concise and beautiful apologia on Julius Caesar, are further evidence of the intense admiration that Shakespeare had for ancient Rome, and for Julius Caesar himself, who was the highest and most complete personification of Rome.

Such a tone of admiration resounds incidentally also in other tragedies, whose plots have little or no connection to ancient Rome. So, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio, to express his admiration for Antonio, says:

The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,
The best conditioned and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies, and one in whom
The ancient Roman honor more appears
Than any that draws breath in Italy. (3.1.304–8)¹⁵

This ideal of man is the same as that which Hamlet sees embodied in his friend Horatio, and which, deep down is the ideal always strived for by Shakespeare: the ancient Roman is strong and affectionate, impartial and wise, as Horatio explicitly demonstrates at the end of the tragedy, by offering to follow Hamlet into death by suicide, exclaiming “I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.” (5.2.374). In contrast, the ferocious Macbeth, tormentor of himself and others, before falling in his final battle, cries:

Why should I play the Roman fool and die
On mine own sword? Whiles I see lives, the gashes

¹⁵ Emphasis by De Lorenzo.

Do better upon them. (5.8.1–3)

Indeed, he wants to die, but in dying he also wants to assert his inextinguishable will to life and power by killing others. The epithet “fool” used by Macbeth for the ancient Roman, who is otherwise acclaimed by Horatio in *Hamlet*, would be applied precisely to Macbeth by just such a Roman, as it is the case, for example, of Lucretius, who well knew to “with calm mind embrace a rest that knows no care” (Book III, line 938-9.). So, love and admiration for the ancient Romans fermented in Shakespeare, almost as an innate virtue. It is with such an inclination to understand and represent the spirit of ancient Rome that he came to the writing of *Julius Caesar*.

The traditional view of Malone, Chalmers and Drake held that *Julius Caesar* was written in 1607, just after *Macbeth*; more recent and reliable research supports the view that it was instead written in the period 1600–1601, right before *Hamlet*. Artistically and psychologically, however, this tragedy is more closely linked to *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, which were written shortly after *Macbeth*, and which form the majestic triad of the great Roman tragedies. As is well known, Shakespeare based these tragedies on Plutarch's *Lives*, first published in London in 1579 (a second edition appeared in 1595, a third in 1603, and a fourth in 1612), in the English translation by Sir Thomas North, from a French translation by Jacques Amiot, Abbot of Belozane, published in 1559, which was itself based on a Latin version of the Greek original. This is the mine from which Shakespeare extracted the travertine and the marble, from which he built the pillars, the arches, and the columns, and at times, even the decorations and the friezes of his wonderful three-naved Roman edifice. Thus Shakespeare followed Plutarch's descriptions more faithfully than those of the chronicles and novellas from which he drew the materials of his other works, thereby enlivening the Roman plays with the sublime lines of his genius. Shakespeare finds himself in the Roman world described by Plutarch and ranges across the psychological and moral habitat that is nearest and dearest to him: it is almost as if he shares the impressions of Cineas, the Greek ambassador of Pyrrhus, who, in the Roman Senate felt as if he were in an assembly of many kings. And from this impression, Shakespeare is drawn to invest the Roman tragedies with an aura of majesty and a tone of superior humanity. This is revealed as early as the first of those plays, which represents the death, and the consequences of the death, of the man he most loved and admired as the ultimate personification of human, moral and mental power: Julius Caesar.

Julius Caesar had already been identified by Shakespeare as a superior human being in several passages in his earlier works. Let us not forget the passage, already cited, in the third act of *Richard III*. Given these precedents, and given the nearly divine aura with which the legendary figure of the emperor is garlanded, critics are often surprised to find in the great tragedy a Caesar full of flaws and vices, both physical and moral: deaf in one ear, subject to fevers and epileptic seizures, ambitious, vainglorious, and full of prejudice; somewhat similar to Napoleon as he appeared to his dear ones in the last years of his empire, and while exiled to St Helen's. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that for Shakespeare even the greatest heroes are human, and nothing human can be alien to them. Therefore, the weaknesses and flaws that Caesar had in life in the first two and a half acts accentuate his spiritual greatness, which suddenly emerges after his death and dominates the remainder of the tragedy. It gains further grandeur in *Philippi*, where, in Brutus' words, it ultimately seems to pervade all the earth:

O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet;
Thy spirit walks abroad and turns our swords
In our own proper entrails. (5.3.105–7)

This is the true immortal greatness of Caesar that Shakespeare also projects in the famous scene that so outraged the critics, where Cassius and Brutus, with their hands full of blood, Caesar's corpse still warm before them, exclaim:

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown! (3.1.124–6)

The critics might be equally outraged by the anachronisms that Helen uses when addressing Hector in the Sixth Canto of the *Iliad*:

Still, brother, come in and rest upon this seat, for it is you who bear the brunt of that toil that has been caused by my hateful self and by the sin of Alexandrus—both of whom Jove has doomed to be a theme of song among those that shall be born hereafter.¹⁶

¹⁶ HOMER / BUTLER, Samuel (2016)

Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi:¹⁷ in this case Jove is Shakespeare, who can exploit these dissonances to make Caesar's spirit wander free, beyond space and beyond time.

This immortality of Caesar's spirit, hovering in the Italian sky, is articulated by our modern writer Alfredo Panzini in his book *Il Mondo è Rotondo* in the chapter where he describes the conscripts of 1899 who marched on the *Via Emilia* to block the advance of the barbarians on the Piave:

But rapid chimes shook Beatus. They came closer. At the end of the sunny road, he saw a dark mass of people. Then he heard the beating of the iron boots on the cobblestones, then a flag flashed, then he saw the trumpets, and then the outlines of the helmets. Then Beatus remembered that this was the *Via Emilia*; that, at the end of the road, was the Roman arch; and that, by him, was Caesar's pedestal. So, Beatus thought, after twenty centuries Italian soldiers still march by you with their iron helmets, O Caesar! Beatus did not see the immense war, he only saw the orderly strength of Italy, the marching army. It was then that Beatus also got closer to the soldiers and marveled. They weren't even soldiers: they were all young conscripts. Beneath the iron helmets, adolescent faces were to be seen. The faces were grimed with earth and etched with lines of sweat; their breath panted slightly: expressionless. They all had the same kind of dazzled expression; maybe it was the sun, or fatigue, or the white dust. Their calves, tightly bandaged, were all white. The officers leading the squadrons were themselves adolescents: how sweet was that adolescence beneath those iron helmets? What strength could hold this adolescence with such discipline? That strength did not come from the living: the living instead had wound up the army in an atmosphere of civil hatred. But there was something rabid in the steps of those iron boots; yet, above the ranks a voice seemed to raise up saying, Caesar, Caesar, here come the soldiers of Italy! And maybe none of them even knew who Caesar was. Then Beatus thought of the ground where the dead lie: the iron boots hitting the ground, drew strength from the ground.¹⁸

Here Panzini, in describing the strength of Italy reborn in the flame of foreign wars and in the blood of civil enmity, unconsciously follows Shakespeare's great footsteps, and has truly represented the immortality of Caesar's spirit, as well as that of Italy and Rome.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare performs a miracle worthy of Caesar and of Rome; for he not only sees in Caesar the highest of men, but, at the same time, also presents his two murderers as great tragic heroes. This is truly the act of an ancient Roman: Rome itself originated in the fratricide between twins nurtured by a "*lupa*", whether that is

¹⁷ "What is permissible to Jove, is not permissible for an ox."

¹⁸ Our translation.

meant to signify the “prostitute” or the beast of Lazio.¹⁹ From such inauspicious and murky origins, the oaken strength of Italy and Rome is born and endures for two and half thousand years. But the blood of the wolf will inevitably boil up in the Italians, violently overflowing into civil enmity and familial conflict, and prompting the rebel, not less great, to always rise against the oppressor. Have we not seen, in our own time, the greatest living Italian, Gabriele D’Annunzio, poet, prose writer, politician and brave soldier, rebel against the government and the King of Italy,²⁰ realizing the prophecy that he had made twenty years earlier to the young king, the grandson of him who rebuilt the Third Italy?²¹

Egli volle Roma,
egli ebbe il Campidoglio
egli ha pace nel Tempio romano.
Che vorrai tu sul suo soglio?
Quale altura è il tuo segno?
Miri tu lontano?
Sai tu come sia bello il tuo regno?
Conosci tu le sue sorgenti
Innumerevoli e la forza
Nuova o antica delle sue correnti?
Ami tu il suo divino mare,
Giovine, che assunto dalla Morte
Fosti re nel Mare?
T’ellesse il destino
All’alta impresa audace.
Tendi l’arco, accendi la face.
Colpisci, illumina, eroe latino!
Venera il lauro, esalta il forte!
Apri alla nostra virtù le porte

¹⁹ Some sources, such as Livy, observe that since the word “*lupa*” means both “she-wolf” and “whore” in Latin, it is possible that the popular legend that Romulus and Remus were nursed by a wolf is a garbling of an account that they were nursed by a prostitute (LIVY / DE SELINCOURT 2002: 35).

²⁰ In 1919, D’Annunzio seized control of the disputed territory of Fiume and ruled it for nearly 16 months. He declared the action as a protest against the failure of Italy to retain territorial power after the “secret” treaties of London assigned Italy’s to an inferior place in the post-war order. Italy’s post-war concessions were branded by D’Annunzio as the “mutilated victory”, and this phrase was later exploited by the fascist regime. For a detailed discussion, see HUGHES-HALLET (2013).

²¹ “Third Italy” here seems to refer to the Third Italian War of Independence, fought under the reign of Vittorio Emanuele II, grandfather to the Vittorio Emanuele III addressed by D’Annunzio in the verse quoted below.

Dei domimii futuri!
Che, se il danno e la vergogna duri,
quando l'ora sia venuta,
tra i ribelli vedrai da vicino
anche colui che oggi ti saluta,
o tu che chiamato dalla Morte
venisti dal Mare,
Giovine, che assunto dalla Morte
Fosti re nel Mare.²²

However, despite the civil war, everyone remained in their place: the king, peacefully secure on his throne, *i duci* and the soldiers, obedient to the discipline and strength of Rome, and the glorious rebel of Fiume. Upon their *concorde discordia*²³ Italy hovers immortally.

A similar vision is to be found in *Julius Caesar*. Caesar, great when alive, even greater after death. But also great are his murderers Brutus and Cassius, such is the manner in which Shakespeare recreates them. Not everyone has had the same admirable vision. Dante unjustly places Brutus and Cassius in the deepest circle of hell, in the mouth of Lucifer, next to Judas Iscariot. In contrast, Michelangelo sculpted in 1540 that wonderful bust of Brutus, to honour that young Brutus of his own time, Lorenzino dei Medici. His face contains all the encrypted strength and noble scorn of the ancient Roman, as also celebrated by Leopardi in his *Bruto Minore* and incomparably represented by Shakespeare himself in *Julius Caesar*.

Let us now turn our attention to how Shakespeare, following the very Roman tradition he brought back to life through his art, represents these two murderers of Caesar. Cassius is described by Caesar himself:

²² The poem quoted here is *Al Re giovine* ("To the young king"). It is included in *Elettra*, second of the five books of *Laudi* (Hymns) composed between 1896 and 1912. In his original project, the *Laudi* were supposed to be a collection of seven books, each with the name of one of the Pleiades (or seven sisters). The fifth book was published posthumously (in 1918), while the sixth and the seventh book had never been started. The poem here cited is an ode addressed to Vittorio Emanuele III. It challenges the new king to fulfil the promise that the Risorgimento would re-establish Italy as a world power. In the poem, D'Annunzio warns the king that failure will breed rebellion among otherwise loyal subjects: "T'ellesse il Destino/all'alta impresa combattuta. / Guai se tu gli manchi!" ("Destiny elected you/to the high fought-over enterprise. /Woe betide you if you fall short.") For a partial translation, see Woodhouse (2001: 194–5). For more information, refer to Barbieri Squarotti (1982; for a general discussion on the *Laudi* pp. 22-37; for a discussion on *Al re giovine*, pp. 36-37).

²³ An "agreed disagreement."

Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look.
He thinks too much. Such men are dangerous.
[...]
Would he were fatter! But I fear him not:
Yet if my name were liable to fear,
I do not know the man I should avoid
So soon as that spare Cassius. He reads much,
He is a great observer, and he looks
Quite through the deeds of men. He loves no plays,
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music;
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort
As if he mocked himself and scorned his spirit
That could be moved to smile at anything. (1.2.204–5, 210–17)

A follower of Epicurus, and a man of thought and action, is Cassius, as it becomes clear through the course of the tragedy, until his noble end, where he runs himself through on his own sword.

Time is come round,
And where I did begin, there shall I end;
My life is run his compass.
[...]
Caesar, thou art revenged
Even with the sword that killed thee (5.3.24–6, 50–1)

And with that same sword, next to his corpse, his friend Titinius, kills himself.

By your leave, gods, this is a Roman's part.
Come, Cassius' sword, and find Titinius' heart! (5.3.99–100)

Brutus dies in the same way. Almost immediately after Caesar's murder, he tells the people of Rome ...

... as I slew my best lover for the good of Rome, I have the same dagger for myself
when it shall please my country to need my death. (3.2.47–9)

Brutus' "love" is not just empty rhetoric. It was recognized by Caesar himself when, seeing himself struck by Brutus also, he refuses to defend himself, covers his face with

his toga and dies, exclaiming, *Et tu Brute, fili mi!*²⁴ Also, Cassius acknowledges this in 4.3, when, wrangling with Brutus, he says:

Strike as thou didst at Caesar, for I know
When thou didst hate him worst, thou lovedst him better
Than ever thou lovedst Cassius. (4.3.116–8)

He then makes the preparations for his death after saying goodbye to his friends, and he effects it nobly by throwing himself on his sword, held out by Strato.

So fare you well at once, for Brutus' tongue
Hath almost ended his life's history.
Night hangs upon mine eyes; my bones would rest,
That have but labored to attain this hour.
[...]
Farewell, good Strato
[...]
Caesar, now be still.
I killed not thee with half so good a will. (5.5.43–5, 55–7)

Over his corpse, his praises are sung by his greatest adversary, Antony, who says to young Octavius,

This was the noblest Roman of them all.
All the conspirators save only he
Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.
He only in a general honest thought
And common good to all made one of them.
His life was gentle and the elements
So mixed in him that nature might stand up
And say to all the world "This was a man." (5.5.74–81)

This is how Shakespeare's genius, interpreting the spirit of ancient Rome, elevates Brutus to almost the same stature of Caesar, creating around both of them a moral and intellectual aura of nearly-superior humanity.

But where does this light of superior humanity, which radiates from ancient Rome and passes through the genius of Shakespeare, originate? I argue that it comes from the profound insight that both Shakespeare and the Romans had into the great vanity

²⁴ The quote here is not from Shakespeare, but appears to conflate Cassio Dione's "Tu quoque, Brute, fili mi" with Shakespeare's "*Et tu, Brute. Then fall, Caesar*" (3.1.85)

and pain of the world, and from an equally profound desire for freedom and independence. For that, one needs to have serenity when confronted with the thought of death, and the power of choosing to withdraw from the pain and misery of life through voluntary death. It has already been shown how serenely Portia, Cassius, Titinius and Brutus take their own lives: it is yet to be seen what judgment they, and the other characters in *Julius Caesar*, make of life and death.

The most jovial of these characters, Mark Antony, while standing among the conspirators, the daggers still dripping in their hands over the bleeding corpse of Caesar, exclaims, much like Hamlet in the graveyard,

O mighty Caesar, dost thou lie so low?
Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils
Shrunk to this little measure? Fare thee well. (3.1.164–6)

And when he is left alone with his dead friend, says,

O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers.
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever livèd in the tide of times.
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood! (3.1.280–4)

This man, the most noble to ever live in the affairs of men, never feared death, just as he claims in 2.2 ...

Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come. (2.2.34–9)

In 3.1, Cassius²⁵ points to death itself as the cure for those who lack this Caesarian sense of serene detachment when confronting death:

Why, he that cuts off twenty years of life
Cuts off so many years of fearing death. (3.1.113–5)

²⁵ De Lorenzo incorrectly identifies the line as by Cassius. In Shakespeare it is spoken by Casca.

For Cassius, as for many ancient Romans, there are spiritual riches more precious than material life and, for their preservation, death is sometimes preferable to life. Amongst these riches, which are worth dying for, there is independence, freedom, just as Cassius argues to Brutus in 1.2 ...

I cannot tell what you and other men
Think of this life; but, for my single self,
I had as lief not be as live to be
In awe of such a thing as I myself. (1.2.100–3)

And he adds,

Men at some time are masters of their fates.
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings. (1.2.146–8)

And, when there is no way to not be an “underling”, to man or to nature, the option of suicide always remains open.

This concept of liberation through suicide has been wonderfully expressed in modern words by Guy de Maupassant in his novella *The Magic Couch*²⁶

Suicide! Why, it is the strength of those whose strength is exhausted, the hope of those who no longer believe, the sublime courage of the conquered! Yes, there is at least one door to this life we can always open and pass through to the other side. Nature had an impulse of pity; she did not shut us up in prison. Mercy for the despairing! As for those who are simply disillusioned, let them march ahead with free soul and quiet heart. They have nothing to fear since they may take their leave; for behind them there is always this door that the gods of our illusions cannot even lock.²⁷

This thought had already been beautifully articulated in a superior fashion by Goethe in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, “... he still preserves in his bosom the sweet feeling of liberty, and knows that he can quit his prison whenever he likes.”²⁸ With a few ancient words, this is expressed by Seneca in chapter XV of the third book of *De Ira*,

Wherever you turn your gaze, there is an end to your troubles. Do you see that cliff? From there you can drop to freedom. Do you see that sea, that river, that

²⁶ In French: L'Endormeuse

²⁷ de Maupassant / Henderson et al (2012)

²⁸ Goethe / Boylan (2001)

well? Freedom lies in its depths. Do you see that stunted, twisted, barren tree? Freedom hangs from it. Do you see your throat, your gullet, your heart? They are the means to escape slavery. Are the ways out I'm showing you too troublesome? Do they require too much bravery, too much strength? Do you ask what may be the way to freedom? Any vein in your body!²⁹

As a matter of fact, Seneca, following his own precepts, was able to find the way to freedom through the veins in his body. Shakespeare's Cassius thinks and conducts himself in a similar way when he says in 1.3,

I know where I will wear this dagger then;
Cassius from bondage will deliver Cassius.
Therein, you gods, you make the weak most strong;
Therein, you gods, you tyrants do defeat.
Nor stony tower, nor walls of beaten brass,
Nor airless dungeon, nor strong links of iron,
Can be retentive to the strength of spirit;
But life, being weary of these worldly bars,
Never lacks power to dismiss itself. (1.3.92–100)

The austerity and solemnity of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, reflecting the vigour and the splendor with which the zenith of the Roman Republic was crowned in the time of Julius Caesar, transmutes in *Antony and Cleopatra* into an unequalled magnificence: matching the red dusk of the Republic and the dawn of the Roman Empire with Octavius Augustus. In *Julius Caesar* the scene alternates between only Rome and Phillipi, and here the only figures on the stage are heroic and virile. Their dominant thoughts of Rome and liberty are only for brief moments veiled and sweetened by the affection of family and the marital virtues of women of ancient Roman stock such as Calpurnia and Portia. *Antony and Cleopatra*, in contrast, sees the scene widen from Rome to Alexandria, from Misenum to Actium, from Messina to Athens and Syria: it takes place on the waves of the Mediterranean and the lands of Europe, Asia and Africa. Meanwhile, upon them the great triumvirs move restlessly, aspiring to command the world; and the Greek-Egyptian spirit of Cleopatra and her fatal passion hovers above it all.

Even as a Roman, and friends with Caesar, Antony was not what Cleopatra herself calls "broad-fronted Caesar" (1.5.34). He thus succumbs to the fatal passion of love and sinks, as he himself says, in "our dungy earth" (1.1.40). To lift him out of this

²⁹ Seneca, *De Ira*, 3.15.4, quoted in Edwards (2007: 103).

dungy earth, the order of Roman thought offers timely rescue, the same order of thought we have seen in *Julius Caesar*: the noble way out of the misery and pain of life through voluntary death. The master of this order of Roman thought is a soldier, the true representative of the strength of Rome, who at Actium in 3.7, implores Antony to attack by land and not by sea.

O noble emperor, do not fight by sea!
Trust not to rotten planks. Do you misdoubt
This sword and these my wounds? Let th' Egyptians
And the Phoenicians go a-ducking. We
Have used to conquer standing on the earth
And fighting foot to foot. (3.7.77–82)

In these words all of the spirit of the ancient Roman soldier is truly engraved. It is interesting to note how Shakespeare's divination coincides with the observation made by Rudyard Kipling about the modern Italian soldiers in the recent Great European War, recorded in *The Times* and in the *Revue de deux Mondes* on August 1st, 1917.

The Italian soldiers wear iron helmets, which differ slightly from the French helmet, and makes them look a lot like the Roman legionnaires on a triumphal tapestry. The size, the body and, more than anything, the poise of these men is particular. They look more supple in their overall movements and less overloaded with accessories than the French and the English; but the main difference consists in their way of marching, the precise way in which they strike their feet on the ground, and at every step seem to take possession of it.³⁰

The Italian soldier described by Kipling is the direct descendant of the ancient Roman soldier described by Shakespeare, who summons Antony to respect and love the motherland and Rome.

In fact, the first words that Antony delivers to his soldiers on setting foot in Alexandria after their escape from Actium, are...

Hark! the land bids me tread no more upon't;
It is ashamed to bear me! (3.11.1–2)

It is from this moment, when he is approaching catastrophe, that his thoughts once again become worthy of Rome. "What shall we do Enobarbus?" he asks in the last

³⁰ Our translation (originally in French).

scene of the third act;³¹ Domitius Enobarbus replies in the Roman fashion, “Think, and die” (3.13.1–2). Thinking, he makes his preparations for death in the same Roman spirit, together with his freed slave Eros:

Nay, weep not, gentle Eros. There is left us
Ourselves to end ourselves.
[...]
Unarm, Eros. The long day’s task is done,
And we must sleep. (4.14.25–6, 44–5)

These are the Roman thoughts we have already analysed in *Julius Caesar*. Such Roman thoughts ultimately ensnare and overcome Cleopatra herself. The Greek girl, the Egyptian gypsy who had conquered Pompey, Caesar and Antony in life, ends up being conquered by the thoughts and actions of Pompey, Caesar and Antony in death, and she gives up her life in the same Roman fashion, casting herself into Augustus’ victory, but ultimately conquering herself:

ANTONY
... she [...], by her death, our Caesar tells
“I am conqueror of myself.”
[...]

CLEOPATRA
Come, we have no friend
But resolution and the briefest end. (4.14.72–3, 4.15.104–5)

Once she has made this resolution, “more fierce through deliberate death”³², as Horace says, Cleopatra in 2.5, speaks and acts with sublime loftiness of thought and feeling. She starts to reject and despise every attachment to life and earth:

... it is great
To do that thing that ends all other deeds,
Which shackles accidents and bolts up change,
Which sleeps and never palates more the dung,
The beggar’s nurse, and Caesar’s. (5.2.4–8)

When she sees that her maidservant Iras has sweetly preceded her in death, she tells her:

³¹ The Folger text, and most other editions consulted, give this line to Cleopatra.

³² Horace, “Cleopatra Ode”, cited in LOWRIE (1997)

If thou and nature can so gently part,
The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,
Which hurts and is desired. Dost thou lie still?
If thus thou vanishest, thou tell'st the world
It is not worth leave-taking. (5.2.349–53)

When receiving the visit from the rustic who carries the asp in the fig basket, she uses Seneca's same words on liberty, found in the tragedy of *Julius Caesar*:

What poor an instrument
May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty. (5.2.289–90)

And applying the asp to her breast, she speaks like Hamlet

With thy sharp teeth this knot intricate
Of life at once untie. (5.2.361–2)

And in the end, death breaks her last thoughts in half. "What should I stay...", which is completed by her maidservant Charmian: "In this vile world?"³³ (5.2.373–4).

The vision of the cowardice of the world, with which Shakespeare closes Cleopatra's eyes, is soon replicated with even darker colours in the tragedy of *Coriolanus*.

Coriolanus was written by Shakespeare in 1609, right after the tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and equally follows the outline of Plutarch's *Life*. However, while the fatal passion of *Antony and Cleopatra* takes place within the dusk of the Roman Republic, and has all the splendor of mauve and gold, the closed tragedy of the disdainful soul of *Coriolanus* flashes in the first dawn of the republic and has in its form and substance all the stiff bitterness of the morning air. In *Coriolanus*, as much as in *Antony*, as much as in *Julius Caesar*, the same civil conflict always burns, from the fratricide of the twins nursed by the wolf, and on which the whole history of Rome is based. But in *Coriolanus* the vision of the cowardice and pain of the world becomes darker; the vision has by now come to dominate Shakespeare's spirit, and leads him to write, soon after *Coriolanus*, the even more pessimistic *Timon of Athens*.

In *Timon*, as much as in *Coriolanus*, the protagonist is an upright man, incapable of bending to the crooked ways of the world, destined therefore to break himself against the rocks and shallows of base humanity. Timon embodies the open, generous and elegant nature of the refined Greek world; Coriolanus is a Roman patrician and war-

³³ Folger uses "wild".

rior with a hard and unyielding temperament. From the clash of this hard steel against the flint of the surrounding world, fly the hot sparks of this tragedy, so full of disdain and scorn for the world.

Coriolanus's temperament, noble and generous, but also, as Schopenhauer observes, irrational and violent, carries within itself the cause of his own ruin, so great and yet so pitiful.

As the good Menenius Agrippa observes in 3.1:

His nature is too noble for the world.
He would not flatter Neptune for his trident
Or Jove for's power to thunder. His heart's his mouth;
What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent,
And, being angry, does forget that ever
He heard the name of death. (3.1.326–32)

He despises all the riches of the world. After the victory in Corioli, his peer, the general Cominius says in 2.2,

Our spoils he kicked at
And looked upon things precious as they were
The common muck of the world. He covets less
Than misery itself would give, rewards
His deeds with doing them, and is content
To spend the time to end it. (2.2.142–7)

When such a noble and generous temperament sees itself surrounded, captured and smothered by the cowardice and evil of men, he breaks its chains like an enraged elephant and becomes the terrifying assailant of Rome, so powerfully described by Menenius Agrippa 5.4.

MENENIUS

There is differency between a grub and a butterfly, yet your butterfly was a grub. This Martius is grown from man to dragon. He has wings; he's more than a creeping thing.

SICINIUS

He loved his mother dearly.

MENENIUS

So did he me; and he no more remembers his mother now than an eight-year-old horse. The tartness of his face sours ripe grapes. When he walks, he moves like an en-

gine, and the ground shrinks before his treading. He is able to pierce a corslet with his eye, talks like a knell, and his hum is a battery. He sits in his state as a thing made for Alexander. What he bids be done is finished with his bidding. He wants nothing of a god but eternity and a heaven to throne in.

SICINIUS Yes, mercy, if you report him truly.

MENENIUS I paint him in the character. Mark what mercy his mother shall bring from him. There is no more mercy in him than there is milk in a male tiger. (5.4.11–30)

And yet this tiger, this dragon, this machine, still has within itself the same beating heart that leads him to ruin and death. When, in the field of the Volscians, he sees his mother Volumnia, and his wife Virginia [*sic*], and his son, and his dear friend Valeria, all begging, he tells himself to resist, not to be moved.

I'll never
Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand
As if a man were author of himself,
And knew no other kin. (5.3.38–41)

A vain proposition – instinct prevails: sentiment, sympathy and love win over reason. The principal architect of this fatal victory of sentiment over reason is Volumnia, the mother. She is the type of the Roman mother, proud, austere, terrible, such as can still be found through the countryside of Italy. She first sets her son on the road to honour, rectitude and pride; she then makes his hardened soul break under the wave of love for family and motherland, and thus sinks him into pain and death. She says “Think'st thou it honorable for a noble man/Still to remember wrongs?” (5.4.176–7). Right words in a purely moral sense, but dangerous advice in an immoral world, as Coriolanus immediately acknowledges:

O, my mother, mother, O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome,
But, for your son—believe it, O, believe it!—
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
If not most mortal to him. But let it come. (5.4.208–12)

Far different from Volumnia is his wife Virginia, sweet, domestic, loving, delicately sketched in half-light: one of the most gracious female creatures in Shakespeare, who is made to live before us in just one sentence spoken to her by Coriolanus: “My gra-

cious silence, hail!”³⁴ In silence Virginia loves, suffers and cries: she cries over the storm of suffering, in which family, friends and enemies alike overwhelm her Coriolanus.

Among those, the worst are the two tribunes of the people, full of bile and rancor, deceitful and vile, and, depending on the circumstances, scared or arrogant, humble or ferocious. Identical in every respect to modern political leaders, and to political leaders of all times and places: the complete antithesis of Coriolanus’ temperament. Against the plebeians, and the tribunes who lead and incite them, Shakespeare directs all of his spite and sarcasm, which is found throughout his other works, and already powerfully expressed in the figure of Jack Cade and the rebels in the second part of *Henry VI*. In *Coriolanus*, the plebeians are called “multiplying spawn” (2.2.93), “many-headed multitude” (2.3.16), “the beastly plebeians” (2.1.98), “the mutable rank-scented meiny” (3.1.88), “the yea and no/ Of general ignorance” (3.1.186–7), “the multitudinous tongue” (3.1.198), “the beast/With many heads” (4.1.1–2), etc., etc. The tribunes are instead called “the tribunes of the people/The tongues o’ the common mouth” (3.1.26–7) and “the herdsmen of the beastly plebeians” (2.1.98). Being human, they respond to insults, and ultimately direct at Coriolanus in 3.1 the merited reprimand: “You speak o’ th’ people/As if you were a god to punish, not/A man of their infirmity” (3.1.106–8). Despite that, the words that Coriolanus directs at the plebeians in the first act, after Menenius Agrippa has told the parable of the belly and the other body parts, have the flavor of rustic truth:

What would you have, you curs,
That like nor peace nor war? The one affrights you;
The other makes you proud. He that trusts to you,
Where he should find you lions, finds you hares;
Where foxes, geese. You are no surer, no,
Than is the coal of fire upon the ice
Or hailstone in the sun.
[...]
Trust you?
With every minute you do change a mind
And call him noble that was now your hate,
Him vile that was your garland. (1.1.179–85, 192–6)

In fact, when the plebeians, incited by the tribunes, turn against Coriolanus, who beforehand seemed their idol, Volumina rightly hurls these fiery words at the tribunes:

³⁴ English citation in the original.

'Twas you incensed the rabble.
Cats, that can judge as fitly of his worth
As I can of those mysteries which heaven
Will not have Earth to know. (4.2.45–8)

So, the crowd may agitate or calm, applaud or tumult, over Coriolanus, just like the sea, which may ripple softly, or crash on the stony cliff, until it weakens and breaks it. In 4.5, the dialogue among the servants gives a lively picture of the crowd's mutability, when they see the symptoms of a new war:

SECOND SERVINGMAN

Why then, we shall have a stirring world again. This peace is nothing but to rust iron, increase tailors, and breed ballad-makers.

FIRST SERVINGMAN Let me have war, say I. It exceeds peace as far as day does night. It's sprightly walking, audible, and full of vent. Peace is a very apoplexy, lethargy; mull'd, deaf, [sleepy,] insensible; a getter of more bastard children than war's a destroyer of men.

SECOND SERVINGMAN 'Tis so, and as wars in some sort may be said to be a ravisher, so it cannot be denied but peace is a great maker of cuckolds.

FIRST SERVINGMAN Ay, and it makes men hate one another.

THIRD SERVINGMAN Reason: because they then less need one another.
(4.5.241–56)

Shakespeare's idea that peace is a cause of hatred among men is reminiscent of Leopardi's in *Storia del Genere Umano*, who, when describing the future world in the image of the ancient and the new socialist utopias, says:

... human life will come to lack all values, and all rectitude, both of thought and action; and not only learning and charity, but the very names of the various countries and nations will everywhere become extinct; so that all men will be gathered as they will be in the habit of saying, into one single country or nation, as it was in the beginning, and profess universal love towards their whole species; though in fact, scattering the human race into as many peoples as there are men. Therefore as no one will have a country which he is particularly bound to love,

or foreigners to hate, each one will hate the others, and of the whole of this kind love only himself.³⁵

Far different from this utopia is the degeneration of the ideal of ancient Rome, as expressed by Menenius Agrippa to the plebeians, agitated and striking because of the famine,

For your wants,
Your suffering in this dearth, you may as well
Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them
Against the Roman state, whose course will on
The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs
Of more strong link asunder than can ever
Appear in your impediment. (1.1.68–74)

This Menenius Agrippa, who uses allegories and parables, is wise and possesses a good sense of humor:

I am known to be a humorous patrician and one that loves a cup of hot wine with not a drop of allaying Tiber in 't (2.1.47–9)

Even he, so wise, happy, loving and good, ends up being disgusted by the wickedness and baseness of the world, and in the Roman fashion, sees death as the only salvation, as he spitefully says to the sentinels of the Volscians who deny him access to Coriolanus,

I neither care for th' world nor your general. For such things as you, I can scarce think there's any, you're so slight. He that hath a will to die by himself fears it not from another. (5.2.108–11)

The ancient Romans' stance on death and liberty is a recurrent and persistent theme in Shakespeare's work, and is also present in his last tragedy *Cymbeline*, composed in 1610. Here, when Posthumus, educated in the Roman school, is locked away in prison, he exclaims,

Most welcome, bondage, for thou art a way,
I think, to liberty. Yet am I better
Than one that's sick o' th' gout, since he had rather

³⁵ LEOPARDI / CREAGH (1983)

Groan so in perpetuity than be cured
By th' sure physician, Death, who is the key
T' unbar these locks. (5.4.4–9)

And, upon receiving notification of his death sentence from the jailer, he replies, “I am merrier to die, than thou art to live” (5.4.175). Strange, that this was precisely the proud response given by Giordano Bruno when he was sentenced to death by the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Rome on the 9 February 1600: “Perhaps you pronounce this sentence against me with greater fear than I receive it.”³⁶ Thus, in Italy, the heir of Rome, great Roman spirits are also to be found among Shakespeare's contemporaries.

The ancient Roman represented in *Cymbeline*, the general Caius Lucius, who is defeated and captured by the British forces of Cymbeline, says to the latter. “Sufficeth/A Roman with a Roman's heart can suffer” (5.5.93–4). Shakespeare's admiration for the Romans and their magnanimity compels him to make Cymbeline, although victorious, consent to remain a tributary of Rome, and to place the Roman banner next to the British:

Caius Lucius,
Although the victor, we submit to Caesar
And to the Roman Empire
[...]
Let
A Roman and a British ensign wave
Friendly together. (5.5.559–61, 580–2)

Shakespeare's admiration of ancient Rome goes so far as to overtake his love and pride for the British motherland, which he had so powerfully and proudly expressed in the histories of *Richard II* and *Henry V*.

Such is the vision of Rome in Shakespeare's tragedies, and so great it is indeed that it should be immensely valued by us Italians.

³⁶ FURTADO (2012)

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