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Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

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Contents

Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

PIERO CAPELLI – <i>Foreword</i>	5
FABRIZIO LELLI – <i>Italian Jews and Theatre in Early Modern Italy</i>	15
MICHELA ANDREATTA – <i>Piety on Stage: Popular Drama and the Public Life of Early Modern Jewish Confraternities</i>	31
CHIARA CARMEN SCORDARI – <i>Behind Multiple Masks: Leon Modena’s Diasporic Tragedy L’Ester in Seventeenth-Century Venice</i>	53
ZEHAVIT STERN – <i>The Archive, the Repertoire, and Jewish Theatre: Zygmunt Turkow Performs a National Dramatic Heritage</i>	71
YAIR LIPSHITZ – <i>Nocturnal Histories: Nighttime and the Jewish Temporal Imagination in Modern Hebrew Drama</i>	91
DIEGO ROTMAN – <i>Language Politics, Memory, and Discourse: Yiddish Theatre in Israel (1948-2003)</i>	115

Miscellany

DAVID LUCKING – <i>Stony Limits and Envious Walls: Metamorphosing Ovid in Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i>	147
CRISTINA CONSIGLIO – <i>Hamlet Overseas. The Acting Technique of Edwin Booth</i>	169

Special Section

PATRICK GRAY – <i>Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: A Reply to Paul A. Cantor</i>	189
ELENA PELLONE – <i>Will Tosh, Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London and New York: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare), 2019, pp. 264</i>	205
NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO – <i>Andrew Filmer and Juliet Rufford (eds), Performing Architectures: Projects, Practices, Pedagogies, London and New York: Methuen, 2018, pp. 235</i>	213
SALLY BLACKBURN-DANIELS – <i>A Theatrical Performance of Vernon Lee’s The Ballet of the Nations</i>	225

PATRICK GRAY*

Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: A Reply to Paul A. Cantor

Abstract

In the previous issue of *Skenè*, Paul Cantor, an eminent senior Shakespeare scholar, author of *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy: The Twilight of Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), provides a substantial review of my recent monograph *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism, and Civil War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). In this essay, I respond to his wide-ranging criticism. I have explained some of my misgivings about Cantor's work elsewhere, including not only the monograph in question, but also a review of *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy* in *The Classical Review*, with particular attention to our disagreement about Shakespeare's sense of historical causation. What does Shakespeare believe drives changes to political institutions? Matter or ideas? 'Conditions of production'? Or religious faith? Turning here, by contrast, to different concerns, I begin by summarizing the philosophical and literary-theoretical argument of my monograph, which Cantor dismisses without further explanation as "abstruse" and "impenetrable". In contrast to a familiar but false dichotomy between 'humanism' and 'antihumanism', Shakespeare offers an appealing compromise vision of selfhood. In keeping with the recent religious turn within Shakespeare studies, as well as the revival of presentism in both history and literary criticism, I respond to Cantor's charge that I am blinded by "Christian dogmatism" and defend my conclusion that Shakespeare's Rome resembles present-day "liberal democracies". Throughout the Roman plays, allusions to the Gospels and to biblical drama introduce dramatic irony. As Peter Lake (2015, 111) suggests, Shakespeare "reanimates and stages" a "neo-Roman" ideology which is "almost entirely secular", then "tests it to breaking point by subjecting it, not merely to a secular historical and political critique, but also to a religious, indeed, a Christian critique".

KEYWORDS: *Julius Caesar*; *Antony and Cleopatra*; *Coriolanus*; liberalism; antihumanism; religious turn; republicanism

I am very grateful to the editors of *Skenè* for this opportunity to respond to Paul Cantor and to explain my misgivings about his review of my recent monograph, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*, as well as to concede a few 'palpable hits'. What troubles me is not so much that Cantor disagrees with me as that he misrepresents my argument, such that I fear a reader will come away from his review with a misleading or at least an incomplete impression of my various con-

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clusions. In particular, Cantor omits what I myself see as the main interest of the book: a philosophical articulation of Shakespeare's sense of human selfhood, as well as the place of that conception within intellectual history (Innes 2019; Campana 2020; Landrea 2020). The word "selfhood" is there in the subtitle: *Selfhood, Stoicism, and Civil War*. But it is nowhere to be found in Cantor's review. So, I feel like I should try to explain this missing piece of the puzzle.

Is the self an illusion? Are we all just pawns of impersonal forces such as class conflict or 'ideological state apparatuses'? When I was a student, which was not so long ago, Shakespeare studies took its inspiration from French theorists such as Foucault, Lacan, and Althusser. Its professed enemy was the deracinated 'I' of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*: the self as disembodied, autonomous 'reason'. Since then, of course, New Historicism has been dethroned; such antihumanism has fallen out of fashion. But nothing has taken its place. Instead, in keeping with David Kastan's exhortations more than twenty years ago in *Shakespeare After Theory* (1999), Shakespeare studies since the turn of the century all too often has abandoned such first-order questions altogether, taking refuge instead in positivist antiquarianism (Parvini 2014). What I propose, therefore, in *Shakespeare and the Roman Republic* is a possible way forward: a Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the once-lively theoretical debate John Lee (2000) aptly dubbed "the controversies of the self".

Shakespeare offers an appealing alternative to the false dichotomy Paul Ricoeur describes as "the quarrel over the cogito, in which the 'I' is by turns in a position of strength and of weakness", and articulates it with more than usual clarity in the Roman plays, as well as Ulysses' conversation with Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida* about an unnamed book ("this strange fellow here") (1992, 4). Their discussion there elaborates upon Aristotle's description of the friend as a mirror in his *Magna Moralia*, in a passage Martha Nussbaum (2001, 364) singles out as "the clearest version" of Aristotle's argument that the independent self-knowledge characteristic of God is not possible for human beings (Arist. *MM* 2.15; Bartsch 2006, 52–3; Langley 2009, 52). Drawing on his experience as an actor and a playwright, Shakespeare develops Aristotle's ground-breaking acknowledgment of human intersubjectivity into a rich articulation of the relationship between the self and the other which anticipates Hegel and stands in stark contrast to Kant.

For Shakespeare, we are neither cogs in a machine nor self-sufficient demigods. The individual is neither a disinterested, reified wisp of untrammelled agency nor a delusion altogether at the mercy of impersonal forces such as 'discourse', 'ideology', or 'language'. Instead, as I explain both in this book and in the introduction to an earlier collection I co-edited, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics* (2014), the granular specificity of interpersonal interaction, occurring at the scale of ethics as opposed to politics, complicates any larger, simpler, and more sweeping construct such as Foucault's 'epistemes'. "Other individuals intervene between culture and the subject, shaping and being shaped in turn, mediating the influence of any kind of *Zeitgeist*" (Gray 2019b, 37–8). The self is "interdependent, at once agent and object, like a partner in a dance or an interlocutor in a dialogue" (95).

Some people might find such a conclusion exciting. For Cantor, however, it is gibberish: "impenetrable postmodern jargon" (2020, 259). As Shakespeare's Casca says of Cicero's Greek, "for my own part, it was Greek to me" (JC 1.2.280).

I met with similar irritated incomprehension from the historian T.P. Wiseman (2019), who reviewed the book for the *Times Literary Supplement* and dismissed it brusquely as “conducted in the abstract idiom of critical theory”. I do not use the technical language of theology, philosophy, and literary theory to show off, however, as Cantor suggests, or to satisfy an imp of the perverse, but because it is the nature of the task at hand. I am arguing against postmodernism, both *per se* and as a supposed analogue for Shakespeare’s own perspective, and I have to use its own language from time to time in order to do so. Like Plutarch in his essay *On the Self-Contradictions of the Stoics*, my hope, at least, in citing “postmodern jargon” such as Althusser’s well-worn term ‘interpellation’ is to use the weapons of my intellectual antagonists against them. Shakespeare is not ‘our contemporary’: Shakespeare’s concept of the self is not nearly as ‘postmodern’ as critics such as Jan Kott, Jonathan Dollimore, and Catherine Belsey once made it out to be.

Another way to explain our differences might be to say that Cantor and Wiseman want to ignore Continental philosophy altogether, as if it did not exist, whereas I want to engage with one form of this tradition, French antihumanism, on its own ground and replace it with a rival form, closer to Hegel, that I see as more flexible, plausible, and humane. I want to displace ‘critique’ and give ‘post-critique’ more specificity. Whether I succeed or not is open to question; evaluating my work in such terms, however, would require first understanding what it is that I am trying to do. My aim in the monograph is by no means to advance the cause of “critical theory”, in the sense of ‘critique’ or ‘symptomatic reading’, but instead to replace what Ricoeur (1970, 32) memorably calls “the school of suspicion” with a different and more nuanced conceptual framework: a sense of human nature as both actor and acted-upon and of subjectivity in particular as both individual and collaborative (‘intersubjective’).

Cantor (2020, 255), by contrast, sees what he calls my “madness for theorists” as nothing more than a stalking horse. “He needs to wrap his book in the mantle of all these contemporary theorists because his underlying argument is so old-fashioned” (256). By “old-fashioned”, what Cantor means here is, in his own words, “orthodox Christian” (256). Cantor implies, in other words, that there is a tradition of reading Shakespeare’s Roman plays as implicitly sympathetic to Christianity that is dominant enough to constitute an orthodoxy within Shakespeare studies. As evidence, he cites two examples, both now almost fifty years old: Joseph L. Simmons (1973), who compares Shakespeare’s Roman plays to St. Augustine’s *City of God*, and Roy Battenhouse (1969), who observes that Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* seems to rely on “dark-shadowing of Christian pattern” as a form of dramatic irony. Cantor frames this association as a black mark against me, but I am not so sure. Here is Battenhouse on *Julius Caesar*, in a passage that I must admit I had never in fact read until Cantor prompted me:

The drama is here structured in terms of a beginning in triumphal entry on a holiday, then a climax with the slaying of its hero at “the ninth hour”, and finally a return of his ghost from the dead to inspire a martyr-like death by his godson Brutus . . . Dramatically its pattern of a purging sacrifice for the “renewal” of Rome – a renewal memorialized by a bathing of murderers’ hands and later of citizens’ napkins in Caesar’s blood – would seem to any Christian audience

a parody of Redemption . . . And when Antony, after Caesar's death, enlists disciples by displaying the "wounds" of the dead Caesar, do we not have a counterfeit parallel to the resurrected Christ's offering his wounds for the view of Thomas the doubter?

(92-3)

Elsewhere in his work, Battenhouse can be maladroit, forcing allegories well beyond what the text will bear. In this case, however, I struggle to see grounds for disagreement. Hannibal Hamlin comes to similar conclusions in his 2013 study *The Bible in Shakespeare*, in which he points out an astonishing array of allusions to the Gospels, as well as English biblical drama, running throughout all of Shakespeare's Roman plays. "Shakespeare spins webs of analogies in which the tragedies of the protagonists are all measured against the tragedy (if it is one) of Christ" (184).

What strikes me as misleading, then, is not so much the comparison to Battenhouse, at least not in this particular case, as the implication that this kind of interpretation of Shakespeare's Roman plays is or ever has been "orthodox" within Shakespeare studies. If there is an academic orthodoxy, it is that Shakespeare is secular, not that he is Christian. As Hamlin observes, writing only seven years ago, "perhaps because of the anachronistic and contrastive nature of Shakespeare's biblical allusions in the Roman plays, literary critics have been tentative about acknowledging or explaining them" (184). For almost the entirety of the twentieth century, in keeping with the influence of the nineteenth-century German critic Georg G. Gervinus, as well as the turn-of-the-century English critic Andrew C. Bradley, seeing Shakespeare as anything other than a forerunner of modern irreligion was very much a minority position.¹ "Elizabethan drama was almost wholly secular", Bradley maintains (1905, 25). Only in the last ten or twenty years, in light of the religious turn in Shakespeare studies after 9/11, has this consensus even begun to unravel. As Brian Cummings (2012) observes, "the world is not as secular as we thought": "when many theorists of the modern have abandoned the secular as an explanation for modernity, it hardly makes sense to think of Shakespeare as a secular apostle".

More worrisome, however, is Cantor's tendency throughout his review to speculate about my own personal opinion of Christianity. "Gray believes in the truth of Christianity", etc. (Cantor 2020, 256). He accuses me of "Christian dogmatism" literally half-a-dozen times (256, 257, 263). I am taken aback by this charge, and I would point out that I have never published anything on Christianity in and of itself, speaking *in propria persona*. Instead, and in deliberate contrast, I try to abide by the principle that literary criticism, as an act of sympathetic imagination, requires some degree of self-abnegation. In my work on Shakespeare, I want to keep the focus on Shakespeare's point of view rather than my own, and our two perspectives do not always coincide.

For example, Cantor claims that "Gray's" response to the fall of the Roman Republic, as opposed to Shakespeare's, is "something like: "Good riddance; those pagans deserved it" (260). But in fact, I personally ("Gray") agree with Cantor that the Roman Republic was a tremendous achievement. The difference is, I do not

¹ On the myth of Shakespeare's secularism see Gray 2019c.

think that Shakespeare shares my own enthusiasm. His earliest Roman play, *Titus Andronicus*, is hardly a case for the glories of Roman self-governance, and something of its wary, disillusioned, pessimistic tone persists in the Roman plays that follow.² As Cantor notes, “the Roman Republic survived and generally prospered for roughly four and a half centuries” (261). Nonetheless, that long stretch of stability is not what Shakespeare seems to care about. Instead, he writes two plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, about how it falls apart.

Even Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece*, despite its subject matter, stops short of celebrating the distinctive political stability, military might, and economic prosperity that followed the expulsion of the Tarquins. Seen from within the confines of Shakespeare’s canon, that is, in terms of the order and chronology of Shakespeare’s composition of the works in which they appear, rather than in terms of Roman history itself, Marcus Junius Brutus immediately undoes what his ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, tries to put in place. The focus throughout Shakespeare’s version of the legend of Lucrece is not on political institutions, as it is in Livy, but instead on personal aristocratic competition. Rather than ending the poem with an encomium of the Republic still to come, Shakespeare introduces a long ekphrasis in the middle focused on the sack of Troy: an adumbration by analogy of Rome’s later fall.

For Cantor, the third play in Shakespeare’s “Roman trilogy”, *Coriolanus*, showcases “communication and negotiation between the patrician and plebeian parties”. Shakespeare’s admiration for the Roman Republic is apparent, he maintains, in the overall balance of power between these two opposing social classes.³ Only Coriolanus is “unwilling to compromise” (262). Yet I cannot help but feel that this reading is forced. Coriolanus stands for more than himself; he is a symbol, a synecdoche, for the same kind of reckless, uncompromising, physically valiant but politically short-sighted male aristocrat that we also find personified in his English doppelgänger, Hotspur, in *1 Henry IV*. He personifies what Lawrence Stone (1974) calls “the crisis of the aristocracy” in England in Shakespeare’s own lifetime. Still more generally speaking, he embodies the political problem Francis Fukuyama (2006) calls *megalothymia*. What do we do as a society if someone is not satisfied with peaceful salutations in the marketplace? If an individual such as Coriolanus, or Caesar, wants to be more than equal? At the end of *Coriolanus*, Coriolanus himself may be dead, but the problem of *libido dominandi* that eventually destroys the Republic seems to me very far from resolved.

In short, as I explain in my review of his most recent book, the problem with Cantor’s take on Roman history is not that it is necessarily wrong, still less that it is uninformed, but that it is not Shakespeare’s (Gray 2019a; Gray 2019b, 17-21 and 110-15). Cantor, I would wager, knows far more about Roman history than Shakespeare ever did himself. Yet he is unwilling to allow for any separation, any daylight, between himself and his ostensible subject. ‘Shakespeare’ thus becomes a proxy for Cantor himself, like Socrates in Plato’s later dialogues. Meanwhile, he ac-

² On *Titus Andronicus* and the ‘pessimistic’ or Harvard School of *Aeneid* criticism see Gray 2016.

³ For further arguments for Shakespeare’s republicanism see Hadfield 2005; for further arguments against see Gray and Samely 2018.

cuses me of undue deference to St. Augustine: “for him, any argument can be settled by a quotation from St Augustine” (256). In lieu of what could easily become a long digression, let me assure you that I do not see St. Augustine as anything like an infallible authority. My interest in St. Augustine in the present context is not as a ‘key to all mythologies’ but instead as a touchstone and synecdoche for one of the two rival schools of thought, Stoicism and Augustinianism, William Bouwsma (1990) identifies as “the two faces of humanism”.

To explain more fully, what interests me about Shakespeare as well as literature in general is not the possibility of corroborating my own opinions but instead the opportunity to step outside my own limited historical and cultural moment and encounter unfamiliar modes of thought. I am not trying to seize yet more grist for the mill of some present-day polemic but instead to de-provincialize myself chronologically; to travel across cultures through time in the same way that a traveler might journey to some far-off, unfamiliar locale. I am interested, in other words, in what is alien in Shakespeare more than I am in what is familiar. This effort is all the more important to me now in light of ongoing political unrest. As history amply shows, Christianity, like conservatism, is not going to disappear altogether. So, we should try to understand it.

In terms of critical method, the burden of proof, as well, seems to me to lie with those who would attempt to show that Shakespeare did not share the common conceptions of his day; that he was an atheist, for example, or a republican; that he leapt across the ages to anticipate our own; as opposed to those who assume, at least as a starting point, that Shakespeare was most likely well within the mainstream of contemporary thought, including not least Christianity, as well as monarchy. Cantor speaks of “Christian dogmatism” (256) with incredulity and contempt. But there is more than one kind of dogmatism: anti-Christian as well as Christian. “How canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou seest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (Luke 6:42) Pronounced antipathy to Christianity can blind us to otherwise obvious allusions, parallels, and influence just as surely as religious faith, especially when coupled with Bardolatry, that is, with the desire to see Shakespeare as an avatar and idealization of ourselves.

That said, I freely grant the book is not without its flaws, some of which are substantive. Most immediately, as Cantor notes, “it has too much of the kind of signposting one finds in graduate student prose” (264). The more essential problem that this compensatory symptom reveals is too much conceptual scaffolding. With the enthusiasm of a doctoral student, trying to squeeze in every new idea, I incorporate too many different abstract frameworks, beyond what a single book can bear. As a result, as Paul Hammond observes, “Some pages are so crowded with brief citations, with major figures appearing only for a sentence or two before giving way to a rival, that the threads of the argument are sometimes hard to follow” (2019, 548). “As the names and texts pile up,” Sean Keilen laments, “it becomes impossible to remember why these sources matter for reading Shakespeare, or how they differ from one another” (2020, 137).

Ten years on, I find myself of two minds about this unusual density of references. I am grateful for Keilen’s good faith effort to make sense of a challenging

book, and I take his point: “for a scholar who is invested in the idea that human vulnerability is the best foundation for rewarding relationships with other people, the extensive review of scholarship throughout this book erects a barrier between Gray and his readers” (137). I myself find it frustrating when modernist poetry such as that of Ezra Pound or the later Geoffrey Hill degenerates into crossword puzzles of obscure allusions, tantamount to a private language, and it is more than slightly distressing to realize that I fell prey here to a similar bad habit. Nonetheless, the difficulty in this case is not entirely of my own devising. In comparison to Miltonists, in particular, or Spenserians, as well as scholars who write about Montaigne, I often wish that more Shakespeareans had a better sense of intellectual history in the *longue durée*, so that my efforts to place “Fancy’s child” on the chessboard of various longstanding debates would not seem so puzzling or require so much effort to explain. When Keilen says, for example, “from my point of view, none of these academic excursions was actually necessary to make”, I cannot help but feel dismay (138).

As it happens, I have been invited to give a paper at the next meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, “Shakespeare after the New Materialism”, in which I will address what I see as the dangers of this tunnel vision for our discipline. Following the collapse of the USSR in the 1980s, ‘postmodern’ theorists such as Lyotard proclaimed their opposition to ‘metanarratives’ (*métarécits*) such as Marxism. This loss of confidence prompted, in turn, a retreat across the humanities in general into the supposed safety of innocuous physical detail. After the grandiose, counter-intuitive claims of Foucault et al., new attention to ‘the material text’ at first felt reassuring. So, too, the names, dates, and welter of objects brought forward by ‘micro-history’.

By now, however, the shortcomings of ‘the New Materialism’ are starting to show through. The danger is, in short, a precipitous decline into deracinated, disconnected trivia: what Adorno criticized in Benjamin as “the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts” (qtd in Kastan 1999, 18). Shakespeare studies as *Wunderkammer* is unsustainable. What we need now in order to fill the gap left by the collapse of ‘Theory’s empire’ is not simply more archival research, still less, a revival of French antihumanism, but instead a re-engagement with the history of ideas, connecting the beliefs of the past to their analogues in the present. Hence my efforts in *Shakespeare and the Roman Republic*, as well as elsewhere, to identify rival traditions of thought and to try to discern Shakespeare’s commitment to one side or the other.

Complicating this endeavor is the sometime stumbling-block, sometime scandal that Shakespeare’s metaphysical, moral, and political assumptions are by no means compatible with many of the most dearly-held beliefs of almost all present-day professional Shakespeare scholars, actors, and theatre directors: in William Bouwsma’s terms (1990), Augustinian, as opposed to Stoic; in Thomas Sowell’s (2007), tragic, as opposed to utopian; in Patrick Deneen’s (2013), Aristotelian, as opposed to Baconian; in a word, conservative, as opposed to progressive. The fact that we today are so uncomfortable with even considering that prospect, that it leads reviewers not only to disagree with me, but to disagree angrily, is itself an interesting second-order problem, and one which I hope to address in my contribution

(Gray 2021) to a forthcoming collection, *Shakespeare and Montaigne: “Falstaff’s Party: Shakespeare, Montaigne, and their Liberal Censors”*.

In *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*, I argue more specifically that Shakespeare does not represent ancient Rome as an idealized forerunner of present-day liberal democracies but instead as a cautionary tale. Cantor, a libertarian, does not like this line of thought: he complains that I “repeatedly confuse the Roman Republic with a liberal democracy” and rejects what he sees as “false parallels between ancient Rome and today’s democratic world” (260). In fairness, I can see where he is coming from. What I should have explained in the book but do not is why more precisely Shakespeare seems to me unlikely, if he could time-travel, to give the distinction Cantor draws between our supposed self-governance and that of ancient Rome as much importance as Cantor does himself. If readers are interested, I am planning to give a longer paper on this problem at the 2022 meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Dublin: “The Tyranny of the Individual: Shakespeare, Liberalism, and Neo-Roman Republicanism”. In the meantime, to split hairs with Cantor as to whether or not ancient Roman tribunes qualify as “representative government”, a form of governance which he claims was “unknown in the ancient world”, and whether or not we today are free from aristocracy, even in what are ostensibly liberal democracies, would be I think to miss the larger point (260).

Drawing on arguments introduced by Machiavelli, philosopher Philip Pettit (1997) and historian Quentin Skinner (1998) distinguish between ‘civic’ or ‘neo-Athenian’ republicanism, which strives to bring about a shared vision of human flourishing (gk. *eudaimonia*), and ‘neo-Roman’ republicanism, which aims instead more simply at protecting individual autonomy from the threat of tyranny (‘non-domination’).⁴ This ‘instrumental’ form of republicanism, they maintain, is substantively different from modern liberalism.⁵ Shakespeare, by contrast, sees republicanism of any kind as subject to the same kinds of intractable structural flaws that Pettit and Skinner attribute to later liberalism, in keeping with the more controversial conclusions of present-day ‘post-liberals’ such as Patrick Deenen (2018), Adrian Vermeule, and Sohrab Ahmari (Fukuyama 2020). Like Hegel after him, Shakespeare calls into question the conflation of hierarchy with tyranny that underpins the concept of ‘neo-Roman liberty’. Social stability, he believes, requires what his Ulysses calls “degree”, including a monarch, as well as an aristocracy (Gray and Samely 2018).

Turning back from politics to ethics, the most serious flaw of *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic* lies, however, elsewhere altogether. As both Keilen and Cantor point out, I do not take nearly enough time anywhere in the monograph to explain that despite my arguments to the contrary, Shakespeare does to some extent admire and feel attracted to the moral vision of ancient Rome, including in particular Stoicism, Epicureanism, and the Senecan ideal of constancy. He

⁴ For a more recent elaboration on this contrast see Nelson 2004. For criticism of this take on the distinction between Roman republicanism and Athenian democracy, see Maddox 2002 and Kennedy 2014a and 2014b.

⁵ For criticism of this notional distinction in kind between (neo-)Roman republicanism and liberalism, see Larmore 2001, Spector 2003, Kapust 2004, and Kapust and Turner 2013.

sees *Romanitas* as misguided, dangerous, and eventually self-destructive, in comparison to Christianity, but he does also recognize its strengths and register its glamorous appeal. As Cantor explains, and I agree, “For all their moral failings, Shakespeare’s Romans embody forms of human excellence that have been much admired throughout history, among them courage, valour, ambition, public spiritedness, indomitable will, iron discipline – all of which can be invaluable to the very survival of a community confronted by enemies” (258).

Although it is no adequate justification, it may help to make sense of this omission if I explain that I originally conceived of the material that became *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic* as only one small part of a much larger project: *Shame and Guilt in Shakespeare* (Gray 2018a). As an undergraduate, I played the role of Macbeth at the same time that I was reading Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* and Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and it struck me that I was encountering the same core debate in different forms: the opposition between what Nietzsche calls “master” and “slave” morality. In classics, this contrast resurfaces in the guise of the more neutral terms ‘shame culture’ and ‘guilt culture’, and I think these categories could be useful for the study of Shakespeare. Like Nietzsche, Shakespeare sees the advent of Christianity as a “transvaluation of all values”. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Shakespeare sees this “slave revolt in morals” as a change for the better.

More precisely, Shakespeare finds himself torn between two competing moral visions. He is committed to one (‘guilt culture’) but also drawn despite himself to its opposite (‘shame culture’). As Cantor writes in his review, “the conflict between what might be called aggressive virtues and compassionate virtues – roughly between classical and Christian virtues – is often at the centre of Shakespearean tragedy” (258). Cantor sees this conflict as intractable, even within Shakespeare’s own mind, whereas I believe that Shakespeare comes down in the end on one side, the opposite side from Nietzsche, the “compassionate” as opposed to the “aggressive”. As Helen Gardner observes, “Pity is to Shakespeare the strongest and profoundest of human emotions, the distinctively human emotion. It rises above and masters indignation” (1959, 60).

As illustrations of “the incompatibility between opposing forms of human excellence”, Cantor points to Henry V, as well as Coriolanus. “The virtues necessary in war time may clash with the virtues necessary in peace time” (258). In light of the work of Paul Jorgensen (1953), I am not sure that Shakespeare would entirely accept the contrast Cantor posits between “war time” and “peace time”. More importantly, I do not agree with Cantor that Shakespeare shares the assumption, associated today with Isaiah Berlin (2001), that human values are irreconcilable: what Berlin calls ‘value pluralism’ as opposed to ‘monism’. Instead, I think Shakespeare believes in a hierarchy of moral goods, in keeping with contemporary concepts of natural law. As I argue in my essay “Shakespeare and War”, Henry V in particular reveals Shakespeare’s sense of the best possible postlapsarian solution to the problem of intransigent *thymos* personified by Hotspur as well as Coriolanus, rather than a variation on the same out-of-control condition. The key to this solution is Christian appropriation of Aristotle’s concept of equity (Gk. *epieikeia*), best known today in the form of just war theory.

More specifically, as the example of Henry V shows, Shakespeare seems to me unlikely to accept Cantor's premise that "Christian piety" is incompatible with "martial heroism" (257). By way of analogy, one might cite Calvin's and other Protestants' fervent exhortations to the young English king Edward VI to emulate the warlike Old Testament king Josiah (Murdock 1998). St. Augustine in particular would not accept that Hamlet's withdrawal from the world or Henry VI's is an accurate representation of Christian virtue but instead would see their unwillingness to engage in moral compromise, to the point, if need be, of violent action, as a blameworthy abdication of their Christian duty to others, given their political station.⁶

What I found as a doctoral student, meanwhile, was that this project, *Shame and Guilt in Shakespeare*, was too big to tackle all at once. What is the difference between shame and guilt and by extension between 'shame culture' and 'guilt culture'? To answer this question properly requires a deep dive into some heated controversies. The idea that Shakespeare has opinions, moreover, seems to shock people. "Shakespeare's genius as a dramatist", Cantor insists, "was a kind of philosophical impartiality, his refusal to take a partisan view of things and his openness to appreciating the merits of either side in any conflict" (263). Keilen, too, balks at what he calls my "unargued assertion" that "'Keats's claim about Shakespeare's 'Negative Capability' is a misleading and counterproductive myth, disabling even the possibility of fruitful debate" (2020, 136).

My "assertion" here is not entirely "unargued", although I grant I could and probably should have said more in the body text. Instead, a note directs the reader to a separate essay on this point, "Seduced by Romanticism" (Gray 2018b), in which I explain my misgivings about Keats's well-known claim (Gray 2019b, 20 n. 79). "Human beings", I argue there, "are by nature double-minded, torn between faith and doubt". Authors write texts, not merely as a form of propaganda or manipulation, that is, as a means to persuade others of their own settled opinions, but also as a form of catharsis, airing and exorcising their misgivings about their own assumptions. "The doubt that shadows their beliefs haunts them, irritates them, and finally, drives them to create works of art, much as a grain of sand in an oyster spurs it to form a pearl" (Gray 2018b, 521).

Shakespeare, for example, dramatizes his doubts about his own opinions by embodying them as charismatic narcissists who steal the scene on stage but in the end meet with ignominy or even tragedy. After allowing proto-Romantic characters such as Antony and Cleopatra to exalt themselves to untenable heights, if only in their own imagination, Shakespeare shows them eventually crash back down to earth. The pattern is essentially that of the Vice-figure in earlier morality plays, albeit executed with much greater subtlety; a variation on what John Parker (2007) identifies as a typology of Antichrist in English biblical drama. Since the advent of Romanticism, however, critics such as Victor Hugo, William B. Yeats, and Harold Bloom tend to misinterpret Shakespeare's moral commitments, not only because his manner of expression is so subtle, understated, and ironic, compared to contemporary preachers and satirists, but also because his 'common sense' is so out

⁶ See, e.g. C. *Faust*. 22.74. On Hamlet see Gray 2014; on Henry VI see Gray 2018c.

of sync with their own opposing sensibility. “Romantic rhapsodizing about Shakespeare tends to misinterpret the movement of his mind”: such critics are too quick to identify the playwright with characters such as Richard II and Falstaff, as well as Antony and Cleopatra, whom he goes out of his way to undercut (Gray 2019b, 186). To read the second tetralogy of English history plays, in particular, as what Bloom (2017, 32) calls “The Passion of Sir John Falstaff” is like reading *Lolita* from the perspective of Humbert Humbert (Gray 2019b, 355).

Turning back to the Roman plays, it seems to me revealing of a more general problem that Cantor does not in practice abide by his professed principle of Shakespeare’s “impartiality”. Instead, the myth of Shakespeare’s “Negative Capability” serves as a motte-and-bailey tactic. More precisely, like like Jeffrey Doty (2019), who raises similar objections to my sense of Shakespeare’s Roman plays, Cantor sees “Shakespearean tragedy” as “a protest against the limitations of the human condition”: Shakespeare, he maintains, “celebrates the heroic spirit in all its efforts to transcend human limits” (2020, 260). This Romantic take is very precisely the opposite of my own contention that Shakespeare distrusts the grandiose sense of selfhood Romanticism shares with Stoicism: a quasi-solipsistic refusal to accept the ‘givenness’ of God, the world, and other people (Berlin 2001; Nuttall 2007, 193). “The moral error that Shakespeare seems to find the most beguiling is a kind of self-absorption” (Gray 2019b, 186). Cantor is welcome to disagree with me; in doing so, however, he contradicts himself. He does not in fact see Shakespeare as ‘impartial’, as he claims, but instead presents him as committed; partisan; engaged. Shakespeare does not stand aloof from the history of ideas, by his own account, but instead can be better understood as a daring precursor of Romanticism: an early modern Schiller.

What such inconsistencies demonstrate is that the critical commonplace that Shakespeare has no fixed opinions is *prima facie* absurd. As both Hume and Montaigne teach us, thoroughgoing skepticism of this kind is in practice impossible.⁷ What would it mean for a human being to have no stable ideological commitments? More precisely, the claim that Shakespeare is ‘undecidable’ requires a separation of the text from the mind of the author that now seems untenable: a conceit (‘the intentional fallacy’) overturned in, e.g. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels’ influential essay, “Against Theory” (1982), as well as the work of Lisa Zunshine (2006). That said, the myth of Shakespeare’s “Negative Capability” does contain a kernel of somewhat mangled truth. Shakespeare is free from the self-righteous scorn of the satirist. Unlike his rivalrous contemporary Ben Jonson, Shakespeare does not sneer at those whom he sees as gone astray but instead responds to their plight with extraordinary empathy. He thinks, as the saying is, ‘there but by the grace of God go I’.

Given this sense of Shakespeare’s Christian spirit of forgiveness, I found myself startled at first by Cantor’s characterization of my tone. “For Gray”, he insists, “Shakespeare had nothing but contempt for the ancient Roman world” (2020, 257). “For Gray, Brutus is a Stoic poseur, Antony is a self-deluded sensualist with aspirations to divinity, and Julius Caesar is a pompous tyrant” (256). A similar interpo-

⁷ For a thoughtful discussion of this problem see Kuzner 2016.

lated insult crops up in Jeffrey Doty's review (2019), too, when he says that I see Cleopatra as "a reckless strumpet" (769). "Strumpet", "poseur", "sensualist": I myself do not and would never use such reductive or pejorative terms to sum up these characters. On the contrary, I would like to think a more accurate description of my tone would be sadness, like Virgil's in the *Aeneid: lacrimae rerum* (1.462). I go out of my way, for example, to observe that Brutus's compassion inspires our sympathy, even though he himself sees his susceptibility to pity as an embarrassing fault, and I wish that I had taken time to say the same about Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

What Cantor misses here is that it is possible to believe that someone is making a mistake without therefore holding that person in contempt. Coriolanus, for instance, seems to me like Mike Tyson in his prime: a mix of terrifying power and inner fragility. If I had been in Mike Tyson's situation, back when I was in my twenties, would I have made better choices? Who knows? My purpose in *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*, and I think Shakespeare's, as well, as a playwright, is not to look up or down at such unusual characters, but instead to evaluate their distinctive approaches to life as potential operating systems for our own. Should I act like Coriolanus? What is likely to happen if I do? In such an inquiry, neither scorn nor admiration enters the picture. I am not scoring contestants in the moral equivalent of a beauty pageant. What I am after instead is my own happiness.

What kind of outcome do I want in life, and how can I get there? Would it help me to enjoy life as much as possible, all things considered, if I acted more like Cleopatra? When I say that Shakespeare does not see Cleopatra's choices as "advisable", I am not engaged in any kind of moral grandstanding but instead thinking through what is for me a very practical question: whether to indulge or to resist the siren call of narcissism (Gray 2019b, 7). I approach these characters, and I think Shakespeare does, too, not as occasions for the exercise of my own self-righteousness, confirming to myself what I already believe to be true, but instead as potential future selves, shedding light on who I might myself one day conceivably become. They are thought-experiments, personified hypotheses, illustrating variations on what Pierre Hadot calls 'philosophy as a way of life' (Hadot 1995; Hadot 2020; Sharpe and Ure 2021).

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