

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

8:2 2022

Nutrix

Edited by Rosy Colombo

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliazzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

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Published in December 2022
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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
<https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>
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KEIR ELAM*

Maria Del Sapio Garbero. *Shakespeare's Ruins and Myth of Rome*¹

Abstract

Del Sapio's book reads Shakespeare's Rome as a multi-layered and palimpsestic cultural and historical entity, tackling issues of national identity and geopolitical expansion in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England. The author brings to this book a judiciously mixed methodological approach, that marries critical theory, cultural studies, historiography, rhetoric, and the history of art and archeology. The main texts discussed in this volume are all – in different ways and to varying degrees – 'Roman': *Titus Andronicus*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The Romanness in play is not merely geographic or temporal: Rome in Shakespeare's plays and poems is not so much a setting as an existential, moral and ideological condition. Del Sapio discusses the rhetoric of Shakespeare's Rome putting into performative action the multi-layered historical and literary compositional style of her subject in a pluri-perspectival critical discourse. The result is a critical palimpsest worthy of its topic.

KEYWORDS: myth of Rome; archaeology; anatomy; anthropology; Roman ruins

Nobody is better qualified than Maria del Sapio to write about Shakespeare's Rome, a subject to which she has dedicated a great deal of scholarly and critical attention, not to mention an international summer school. This excellent volume – part of the Anglo-Italian Renaissance series, edited by Michele Marapodi – is the crowning achievement in her long and fecund frequentation of Shakespeare's Roman plays and poems.

Del Sapio's book reads Shakespeare's Rome as a multi-layered and palimpsestic cultural and historical entity. It is the Rome of Titus and Caesar, but also the Rome of Renaissance excavations and philological reconstructions. At the same time, crucially, it is the noblest part of Britain's own historical and cultural heritage, as was testified to by the archeological discoveries taking place at the time Shakespeare composed his plays and poems. Thus to write about Rome from early modern London was not merely to commemorate a prestigious imperial past, but also to engage with the issues of national identity and geopolitical expansion that so occupied late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England.

¹ Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021. ISBN 9780367559106, pp. 404

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Shakespeare's Rome was multiply overdetermined, passing through the filters of classical historiography, medieval and Renaissance philology, contemporary antiquarianism and the literature and drama that preceded Shakespeare's own. The author brings to this book a judiciously mixed methodological approach, that marries critical theory, cultural studies, historiography, rhetoric, and the history of art and archeology. Such transdisciplinary breadth allows her to range agilely from close textual analysis to theoretical pyrotechnics to historical and new historicist explorations.

The central theme of this book is a ghostly and disquieting presence shared by Renaissance Italy and early modern England alike, namely that of ancient Roman ruins. England could certainly not compete with Italy in the expanding field of archeological finds, but nevertheless the increasing quantity and prestige of what William Camden calls 'remains' underlined the fact that Rome was still actively present under the surface of Britannia. The ruins of Britain turned out to be in part ruins of Roman Britain: "As tangible fragments of a surviving past, ruins were discovered as temporally alien and geographically contemporary" (57). This gave added significance to the representation of Rome in Shakespeare's plays and poems, which are not merely the *mise en scène* of a historically and geographically distant elsewhere, but also the evocation of Britain's own, and still tangible, past. Between Shakespeare's London and Roman Londinium there may have been no chronological continuity, but there was at least a series of highly evocative discontinuities that gave added force to the Roman fictions being acted out onstage.

The main texts discussed in this volume are all – in different ways and to varying degrees – 'Roman': *Titus Andronicus*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The Romanness in play is not merely geographic or temporal: Rome in Shakespeare's plays and poems is not so much a setting as an existential, moral and ideological condition. This condition is not always met by the protagonists of the plays, since being Roman is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for the status of *Romanitas*; abundantly present in the figure of Julius Caesar, for example, it is less so in the case of Titus: "But what is lacking and dramatically debilitating in the production of an accomplished and hence persuasive tale is Titus's own public Roman body, the male oratorical body of a leader who is typically invested with *Romanitas* – *virtus* as well as grace, eloquence, authority" (99).

Del Sapio's critical enquiry hinges substantially on two A's: archaeology and anatomy. "[M]y volume aims", she affirms in the introduction, "at reassessing the myth and role of Rome in Shakespeare's world by adopting a critical perspective which is grounded on the 'wordly' new science of anatomy as well as on an emergent archaeological consciousness of the past" (14). Archeology, the paradoxically new science of antiquity, feeds into the volume's dominant discourse of the ruin, beginning with *Ruinorum Romae Descriptio* – the first book of Poggio Bracciolini's *De varietate fortunae* (1448) – which portrays a Rome denuded and fragmented: "The public and private edifices that were founded for

eternity, lie prostrate, naked and broken, like the limbs of a mighty giant" (17). Rome, in Poggio's perspective, "was tantamount to its ruins" (16). In modern times such an archaeological conception of the world falls under the aegis of Benjamin's angel of history ("Theses on the Philosophy of History").

Anatomy, instead, is especially foregrounded in the discussion of *The Rape of Lucrece* in Chapter 2 – "Lucrece's Pictorial Anatomy of Ruin" – and in particular of the long ekphrasis that the protagonist provides following her rape: "a vicarious exploration of the self through which, before putting an end to her life, she transforms her own face, by way of a fashioning *ars moriendi*, into a disquieting 'anatomy of ruin': a living and revengeful *tabula anatomica*, as I would like to call it" (136). Lucrece's post-rape assertion of identity through the discourse of anatomy represents a veritable cognitive revolution, underpinned, as it is, by "the new science of bodies", or by what Jonathan Sawday has called the new "culture of dissection" (137).

To these two A's one might add a third, anthropology, to the extent that one of the main fields of enquiry – for example, in Chapter 4 on *Coriolanus* – is human behaviour viewed under the stress test of a precariously emerging civilization: "Shakespeare's intention in *Coriolanus* . . . seems to have been that of representing the predatory humanity of the age of iron" (226). Likewise in *Titus*, the dramatist's take on his subject (in Chapter 1, "Starting with the Debris of *Finis Imperii: Titus Andronicus*") is that of the anthropologist bricoleur: "In his first Roman play, Shakespeare deals with Rome as if he were invested in an endeavour similar to that of Lévi-Strauss—coping with an ungraspable referent" (79). On this anthropological horizon, the volume embodies what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle and the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz called thick description – or in our case thick critical discourse – that places the cultural object within its behavioural and interpretative context.

The author abundantly and generously acknowledges her debt to her predecessors in the field, among them Robert Miola, Janet Adelman, Stephen Greenblatt and Heather James. At the same time, the book enacts, as it were, its own subject, in the sheer eloquence with which Del Sapio discusses the rhetoric of Shakespeare's Rome, putting into performative action the multi-layered historical and literary compositional style of her subject, by means of her pluri-perspectival critical discourse, which brings together – in a horizontal and non-hierarchical fashion – Camden and Benjamin, Du Bellay and Foucault. The result is a critical palimpsest worthy of its topic. Perhaps her main historical guide is William Camden, whose *Britannia* ascribes to Julius Caesar "the merit of having inscribed Britain into history; or, in other words, of having written its first inhabitants into existence" (55).

The volume is endowed with a double introduction. The first part sets out from Shakespeare's pun on "Rome" and "ruin" (and thus on Roman ruins) in sonnet 64: "Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare", a verse that pithily summarizes what the author describes as "the Renaissance vision of Rome as a ruinous scenario (of texts and stones)" (29). The sonnets may not be the first texts that

come to mind when one ruminates on the ruins of Rome, and yet, surprisingly, “ancient Rome turns out to be the effaced but under-written text in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*” (32). Ruins are what become of gilded monuments, besmeared with sluttish time.

The second introduction is dedicated mainly to Camden, the connoisseur of the English ruin, who has no need to visit Rome in order to find material – and no longer merely legendary – traces of the Roman past: “Here, without travelling, Elizabethans were offered the vicarious experience of ‘strange things’ and temporal as well as geographical elsewheres . . . As tangible fragments of a surviving past, ruins were discovered as temporally alien and geographically contemporary. In fact, they pertained to a topography that the antiquarians increasingly disclosed as a layered field of visibility and spectrality” (57). The author cites the emblematic case of St. Paul’s Cathedral – once the site, according to Camden, of a temple dedicated to Diana – which disclosed an unimagined wealth of subterranean archeological finds, as if to show that the passage from pagan to Christian had brought about an ideological but not a functional change in the venue.

The first chapter proper, “Starting with the Debris of *Finis Imperii*”, is concerned with *Titus*, a tragedy that almost paradoxically inaugurates Shakespeare’s tragic dramaturgy by staging the end of the Empire: “Sacrifices as feasts or feasts as sacrifices open Shakespeare’s first Roman play, in a barbaric scenario of *finis imperii* characterized by an anxiety to reaffirm, by means of hostile bodies turned into communal food, a shared imperial sense of identity” (88-9). Not only does Shakespeare begin at the end; he starts at a point that is already beyond endings: “Shakespeare’s Rome is already a world of ‘remains’, mourning, and memorials, when he designs Titus’s opening triumph (*Aeneid*, Book 6 at hand) as mostly a burial of his own ancestry” (89). *Titus*, with its re-presentations of barbaric ritual, its indulgence in physical and political dismemberment, and its spectacular concluding act of cannibalism, is as far from the *civitas* of Augustan Rome as can be imagined. And yet it is just these extremes of violence and decadence that make the play exemplary within the ‘Roman’ subgenre: “a laboratory where more explicitly than in the ensuing Roman plays, but with a deep impact on them, I argue, he unfolds a sort of *manifesto* of how he intends to deal with inheritance and memory” (122).

Perhaps the richest and most spectacular chapter in the volume is – perhaps paradoxically – the one that is furthest removed from the stage itself, namely chapter 2, “Lucrece’s Pictorial Anatomy of Ruin”. Central to the discourse of this chapter is the heroine’s extraordinary post-rape ekphrasis, that Del Sapio describes as “a vicarious exploration of the self through which, before putting an end to her life, she transforms her own face, by way of a fashioning *ars moriendi*, into a disquieting ‘anatomy of ruin’: a living and revengeful *tabula anatomica*, as I would like to call it” (136). The anatomy is “living” thanks to a process of artistic and existential exchange between subject and picture that takes place through the mediation of Lucrece’s rhetorical power. The specific pictorial genre

evoked in this inter-artistic exchange is the *écorché*, a study of the human body that derived from the science of anatomy. More specifically, the “well-painted picture” of the despairing Hecuba described in the ekphrasis recalls the pencilled or chalked Renaissance *tratteggio* that leaves the subject’s face in a state of *non-finito*: “Shakespeare himself seems to refer us to such a state of ‘work in progress’ when he later elaborates on Hecuba’s figure as ‘pencil’d pensiveness and colour’d sorrow’ (1497): as if Hecuba’s figure had been left midway on its transformation from pencil to colour, abstraction to *mimesis*” (140).

Lucrece’s ekphrasis is not merely a multiply mimetic essay on anatomy; it becomes “the personification of *Anatomia* itself, a self-flaying and flaying deity whose symbols in early modern culture were the mirror and the knife, an iconography derived from the myth of Perseus and Medusa” (159). By the same paradoxical process of self-assertive auto-immolation, her suicide is at the same time a ritual act of liberation, “a patriarchally encoded gesture of self-cleansing” (162), whereby she is able to re-conquer, in the eyes of the community, the very ‘chastity’ that Tarquin’s act of violence and violation had publicly tarnished.

The science of anatomy is similarly posed in foreground in the third chapter, “Anatomizing the Body of a King”, where the anatomized monarch in question is *Julius Caesar*, but also, inter alia, James I, within the framework of the Augustan iconography that the monarch knowingly adopted (186). Here the Mannerist distortions and disproportions of Shakespeare’s Caesarean body – that recall the dicta of Giovanni Lomazzo’s *Tracte Containing the Artes of Curious Paintinge*, in Richard Haydocke’s illustrated 1598 translation – ironically reflect the ideological position of the opponents of the ‘King’: “In Shakespeare’s play, the art of perspective and proportions, or anthropometry, seems to be turned into a heretical and dangerous knowledge. Indeed it is one with Cassius’s conspiratorial project. Caesar if figured as a giant straddling the Roman worldwide geography with is ‘huge legs’” (186). The play, with its reiterated onstage displaying of Caesar’s massacred corpse, literalizes the trope of the anatomy theatre, allowing the dramatist to participate in the “revolutionized cognitive paradigm” of the dissected body (178).

Chapter 4, on “*Coriolanus*’s Forgetful Humanism”, reflects on the issues of memory and hospitality. In Act 4, scenes 4 and 5, the protagonist is victim/perpetrator of an amnesiac lapsus, symptom of his ‘tired memory’: “. . . Coriolanus does not remember his host’s name. His poor host is left to his state of being merely caught sight of, his cry unanswered . . . Is Shakespeare elliptically foregrounding in this apparent marginal scene what leads his hero to the final disaster, that is, his difficulty to transfer himself from his patrician and solipsistic *virtus* to the much more complex sphere of social and civic virtues?” (232). The author aptly relates this incident to Derrida’s complex notions of hospitality and ‘hostipitality’ (hospitality/hostility; “Hostipitality”, 2000), whereby *Coriolanus*’s failure in etiquette and reciprocity – of the kind that Seneca addresses in his essay *De Beneficiis* – may also be read as an act of strategic but fatal forgetting.

The fifth chapter, “Caesar’s Wing”, on *Cymbeline*, addresses the hybrid and

anachronistic temporality of the play as a supreme example of Shakespeare's palimpsestic dealings with ancient (and not so ancient) Rome: "But it is in *Cymbeline's* Augustan time and in its hybrid spatial and generic context—half ancient Rome, half Renaissance Italy, half history, half fable . . . that [its relationship with the past] . . . was overtly addressed and accomplished by Shakespeare" (250). It is, in other words, precisely the overlapping of levels of historical time, together with the concurrent mixing of dramatic genres, that enables the playwright to develop a uniquely inclusive 'both/and' poetics that makes him simultaneously a contemporary of ancient and of modern Romans. And it is such contemporaneity that paradoxically transforms Augustan Rome into an ideal space for the representation of the growing early modern English sense of nationhood: "In *Cymbeline* the historical geography of Rome, the ruins of its declining values and its myth, served overtly as a world-scale stage on which to project the performance of the Tudors' and Jacobean's growing sense of national identity and their nascent imperial ambitions . . ." (280).

One of the more surprising cross-temporal presences in the 'Renaissance' scenes of *Cymbeline* (in 2.4) is the tapestry of Cleopatra purportedly discovered by Iachimo in Innogen's bedchamber. Iachimo performs an ekphrasis that, like the description of Hecuba in *Lucrece*, provides an inset *mise-en-abyme* that transcends both historical and artistic borders: "Shakespeare has stealthily furnished Innogen's northern bedchamber with some of what Hazlitt describes as Cleopatra's 'luxurious pomp and gorgeous extravagance'. He has classicized its interior with riches of incommensurable value and incalculable risk." (288). Del Sapio takes the episode – which testifies to Cleopatra's role as erotic myth and, at the same time, as ocular proof of Innogen's supposed 'Egyptian' infidelity – as an intertextual and inter-artistic lead-in to her final chapter (six), on "World and Ruin in *Antony and Cleopatra*", largely devoted to the theme of "The disintegration of Antony's heroic self" (318), through the disjointed and disarticulated *longue durée* of archaeological time. In this dilated temporal perspective, the tragic epos of Antony – and more specifically, of Cleopatra's Antony – is emblematic of the poetics of the ruin in the Roman plays as a whole: as Del Sapio observes in her concluding remarks, "Cleopatra's Antony is both ruin and myth: his broken name calls for sceptical hermeneutics (the work of passers-by, lovers, archaeologists, epigraphists, philologists) on one side, as well as desirous and transcending poetry on the other. In this Cleopatra is a figure of burial, melancholy, memory, and authorship as well as of unquenchable desire: the same which fuels the eroticism of her theatrical reunion with him" (334).

This is one of the more explicitly and insistently Derridean chapters in the volume. The play's extraordinary series of letters, messengers, envoys, dispatches, scrolls and the like recalls the French philosopher's *The Postcard*, whereby "the play's language flirts (as already in *Titus*) with the volatile condition of the 'envoy'" (305). The chapter likewise 'flirts' – not for the first time in the volume, as we have seen – with another Derridean theme, that of 'hostipitality', where the question "Who plays the host?" becomes central to the agential dynamics

of the tragedy. Del Sapio's outstanding study is itself hospitable, in its generous openness – at once learned, profound and playful – to multiple disciplinary discourses. To judge from this book, the myth of Rome is as powerful and as generative as ever.

