

Introduction: A Mad World, My Masters!

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Americans have mixed feelings about monarchs and monarchies. We revolted against one, yet, in our periodic yearnings for the trappings of the occasional “imperial presidency” we sometimes wish we had a king. We embrace, unknowingly perhaps, the medieval concept of “the king’s two bodies,” often equating the health and stability of the man (almost always men in Shakespeare) who rules, with the “body politic” of the country itself, whether it is the *Life* magazine-style glamour of Kennedy’s “Camelot” or the Twitter-fed tribalism of Trump’s “American carnage.”

Americans, speaking again very broadly, tend to view Shakespeare’s histories through the first of these two bodies. We look to the plays for a study of the man, not the monarchy: Hal’s growing up, Hamlet’s angst, Richard III’s seductive villainy, Lear’s madness, etc. Then we pause and look kindly, if not condescendingly, on the political bits, cutting them where we can (“maybe the Brits get this stuff, I don’t”) or trying to make them relevant (setting the Henriads in the American Civil War, for example). All of which tends to imbue the plays with an over-coating of rugged American individualism that I am not sure Shakespeare had in mind (as if one could ever know).

One of the ways recent productions have tried to counter this, as several of our contributors point out, is to have women play the kings (not that women can’t be rugged individualists, let me hasten to add). It seems from the essays in this volume, as well as other recent commentaries, that the casting of women, and particularly women of color, has a democratizing effect on these plays; that their “kingships” seem more collaborative and their relationships less self-aggrandizing than when performed by men. But is that what Shakespeare “intended” (again, as if one could ever know)? Or does it simply frame the individualism through

an alternative lens? A refreshing and needed lens, but an individualistic lens nonetheless. Is there yet another lens through which we can read the plays as more about the public body politic, than the private one?

Jan Kott, in his seminal study “The Kings,” wrote of history as a “Grand Mechanism,” a staircase or a great wheel, on which a Henry or Richard is always rising or climbing to the top while another of the same name is tumbling down. History is a ruthless machine, implacable and impersonal. There was no Lord’s anointed in Shakespeare’s view of history, Kott argued, only a lust for power that drove monarchs to chop off heads, build or break alliances, and “busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels” (*HIV2*, 4.1.372–30). But when Henry V reads out the list of English dead after the battle of Agincourt, those mentioned are nobility, like himself, the one per-center “band of brothers.” Of those of no “name” but “five and twenty” who died (*HV*, 4.8.110), both Hal and Kott seem to have forgotten the likes of Mouldy, Shadow, Wart, Feeble, Fang, Bullcalf, Snare and Davy, who Shakespeare and Falstaff use for cannon fodder in *Henry IV, Part 2*. To the one percent they are indeed of no name.

Shakespeare takes an uncommon interest in these common men and women. They are the Citizens in *Richard III*, who remain mute as “breathing stones” when Buckingham tries to get them to shout “God save Richard. England’s royal king!” (*RIII*, 3.7.20–25). They are Grooms and Gardeners in *Richard II*, the Quicklys and Tearsheets in *Henry IV*, the poor Bardolfs hanged in *Henry V*, the Pompeys and Overdones of *Measure for Measure*, the Servants in *Lear* who go to Gloucester’s aid, and the Soldier who somehow manages to find his way into Cleopatra’s bedroom to boldly beg Antony not to “fight by sea” (*A&C*, 3.7.77) on the morning of battle.

It is through these men and women that we know something is rotten in Denmark. Note that Shakespeare is careful to have the foot-soldier, Marcellus, tell us that something is “rotten in

the *state* of Denmark” (*Hamlet*, 1.4.100)—we already know the old king’s physical body has been poisoned. It is the body politic that is rotting now. Marcellus, a commoner, speaks truth to power about the corruption of the state. He is part of the body politic, erupting like a blister or abscess, who must be attended to but is often ignored. These nameless subject-citizens know when the country bleeds. They suffer most when Kott’s “Grand Mechanism” begins to turn. A Richard is replaced by a Henry, who courts the “common people,” and seems “to dive into their hearts”:

KING RICHARD. Off goes his bonnet to an oyster wench;

A brace of draymen bid God speed him well

And had the tribute of his supple knee,

With “Thanks, my countrymen, my loving friends,”

As were our England in reversion his

And he our subjects’ next degree in hope. (*RII*, 1.4.25–37)

That Henry is followed by another Henry, and a Henry yet again, until another Richard replaces him, who is in turn replaced by a Richmond. Does it surprise us today if an audience might be confused by poor Margaret in her grief?

QUEEN MARGARET. I had an Edward till a Richard killed him;

I had a husband till a Richard killed him.

Thou hadst an Edward till a Richard killed him;

Thou hadst a Richard till a Richard killed him.

DUCHESS. I had a Richard too, and thou did'st kill him;

I had a Rutland too; thou holp'st to kill him.

QUEEN MARGARET. Thou hadst a Clarence too, and Richard killed him. (*RIII*, 4.4.40–48)

Does it matter to those of no name which Richard it was or what Edward or Gloucester or Northumberland? No matter the name, it will not turn out well for those at the bottom. At best you might get a Richmond, Malcolm or an Edgar/Albany (depending which ending of *Lear* you prefer). At worst, you get a Fortinbras, or the post-assassination civil war of *Julius Caesar*. It is always the body politic that pays for the madness of the body private.

II

In planning this volume, several titles were tested and found wanting: *Kings and Fools* (rules out Queens), or *Monarchs and Fools* (seemed a little “ye olde-y”), until we came to the current *Monarchs and Madmen*. The “Monarchs” part, given the discussion above, was fairly clear. But who were the madmen and, yes, women?

Obviously there is the Fool in *Lear*, Falstaff, Lucio in *Measure for Measure*, Puck etc. But, as our contributors point out, Cordelia and Angelo are also fools, foils to Lear and the Duke of Vienna. Antony and Cleopatra keep switching roles of Fool to Monarch, Monarch to Fool, as the mood, their “dotage,” takes them. Fools, yes, but “madmen?” Shakespeare’s mad men and women tend to be evil, the Iagos and Lady Macbeths of tragedy. As was discussed in the previous *Playing Shakespeare’s Villains* volume in this series, evil is perpetrated by those lacking empathy; those who grow and prosper at others’ expense, as Edmund the bastard does in *Lear*; or who revel, as Aaron the Moor does, in a catalogue of evils:

AARON. But I have done a thousand dreadful things

As willingly as one would kill a fly,

And nothing grieves me heartily indeed

But that I cannot do ten thousand more. (*Titus*, 5.1.143–6)

It is interesting that Shakespeare's great villains, like Iago, Macbeth and Richard III, never quite go "mad," but maintain a sort of self-control, even as the evil they instigate spirals out of hand. They remain detached, which is perhaps an even more frightening form of madness, that of the sociopath. "Demand me nothing," declares Iago at the end of his villainy. "What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word" (*Othello*, 5.2.355–6).

In the late Shakespearean Romances, one can view the monarchs of these plays also as madmen: jealous Leontes, revengeful Prospero, obsessive Pericles, and just about everybody in Cymbeline's Britain. Reconciliation comes at the last minute, redeeming great pain and injury and restoring some sanity and balance to both king and kingdom. In the great Tragedies, without that reconciliation, madness is the coin of the realm. Lear, Hamlet, Othello, even Brutus in his oblivious fanaticism, are all mad in some sense, and we watch, as Ophelia does, noble minds overthrown, "like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.172), realizing that "we that are young / Shall never see so much nor live so long" (*Lear*, 5.3.394–5).

Yet it is in the Histories where the collision of monarchs and madmen does the most damage, because the monarch is more often than not his (or her) own madman. Rash actions, such as Richard's banishment of Bolingbroke, bring equally rash reactions (rebellion and regicide), which, in turn move the Grand Mechanism to its next phase. In this context, Henry's

son Hal is less the foundational national hero of a St. Crispian's Day emerald isle, than a pause in a long and inevitably downward turn of the wheel towards Richard III (which then turns upward in Richmond and the establishment of the Tudor line, and so on). The "band of brothers" of *Henry V* is the same set of nobles who carve up Henry VI's kingdom like hyenas, leading to the ascent of a madman for a monarch in *Richard III*.

Shakespeare's clowns and fools were known for three things: their malapropisms (think of Dogberry), their ability to speak "truth to power" (the Fools in *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*), and their skills in jigs and tumbling (Will Kemp supposedly danced a 100-mile Morris dance from London to Norwich after leaving Shakespeare's acting company). In the Histories, Shakespeare's monarchs play their own fools. Richard III "capers" and dances across the stage. *Henry VI* is a trilogy about the manipulation of power through the language of curses, prophecies, oaths and commands, but Henry is a king who, when he finally comes of age, is so intimidated by that power that he speaks only in political malapropisms, wishing he were a shepherd playing on pipes. Henry V plays jokes on his own men the night before battle, and makes a mash of the French language as soon as he conquers that country. Henry IV has a clown for a son and a fat fool for a rival and is weighed down by the crown he stole. Age and illness have robbed him of the bluster and common touch he used against Richard, who, more than any other monarch in Shakespeare's histories, knows the absurdity of the role he plays. Give up the robe, scepter, and crown—just give me a little mirror with which to see my naked mortality. It is a joke played not only on the Lord's anointed, but on all of us. To quote another monarch/madman, "they told me I was everything. / 'Tis a lie. I am not ague-proof" (*Lear*, 4.6.123–4).

We live in an era where the institutions of democracy and a civil society, such as free speech, a free press, and an educated electorate, seem to be at risk, not from some outside alien battering at our gates, but from within. We are in danger of letting the body politic rot, like the state of Denmark, because of the madmen we let rule. The times, indeed, are out of joint, and only we, in the lists of battle with no name, can set it right. One of the most exciting (not a word I often use) things for me about this collection of essays is to see the way young people in the youth theatres in Los Angeles and Louisville tackle both Shakespeare's language and his politics. They are a physic the body politic desperately needs.

Shakespeare, influenced by Montaigne, gives us the blueprint for a Jeffersonian utopia, a shining city on a hill to which we might aspire:



GONZALO. I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries

Execute all things, for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation; all men idle, all,
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty—
... All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavor; treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth

Of its own kind all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people ...
I would with such perfection govern, sir,
T' excel the Golden Age. (*Tempest*, 2.1.1663–85)

We are the madmen if we let our monarchs take this future from us. Resist!

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