Speech and Spectacle as Political Participation for Shakespeare's Roman Women

Alisa Manninen

Abstract
The public spectacle is central to ancient Rome in the Western imagination. Through spoken rhetoric and acted performances, spectacle offers a means for political participation that can be accessible even to women. Shakespeare explores these opportunities in his Roman plays. In *Julius Caesar*, the unease over corruption extends to Portia's failure to transform her claim to Roman virtue into a meaningful role in the republic. *Coriolanus* gives its concluding triumph to Volumnia: she is the play's most emphatic, successful performer of Romanness. Though Cleopatra claims control over noble suicide in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the sense of diminishment that is created by Caesar's victory is echoed in Octavia's irrelevance to the performances of the Roman Empire: stripped of the roles that women and citizens could play, spectacle will serve the emperor alone.
Key-words: *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*.

1. Shakespeare's Rome

Few ancient civilisations are as strongly associated with virtue as Rome, yet even though the city conjures up imagery of human excellence, it is also seen to be engaged in a losing battle against its decay. The republic makes way for the empire, empire descends to decadence and drawn-out dissolution. In the early modern era, Rome nonetheless represented the peak of virtue in its heroic rather than Christian sense. The Roman is someone to be admired, yet his individual achievements also serve the greater purposes of his city. However, when a Roman falters at carrying out his civic duties and living virtuously, the question that has to be asked concerns not only his individual moral and political health but that of the state: has this particular Roman failure also hinted at a wider crisis? When they turned to the history of the late empire, Renaissance writers scarcely

needed to spell out the answer, so widespread was the assumption of corruption. Rome thus offered writers an opportunity to portray political conflict within the state without taking quite so many risks as were involved in staging their own country's history. In this, they employed topics and imagery that Rome's cultural ubiquity had made widely available to both elite and non-elite audiences.

William Shakespeare's Roman plays, *Julius Caesar* (ca. 1599), *Coriolanus* (ca. 1605-08) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (ca. 1607), ask how the individual can hope to become a worthy political actor. The Roman we are most likely to envision is emphatically a citizen, speaking in the marketplace, arguing his point in public or in writing, participating in military conquest and the administration of foreign lands. Such activities offered an opportunity to demonstrate virtue. Catherine Edwards (2007: 78) notes that "*virtus* generally had the sense of bravery, both physical and mental"; I would add that mental bravery could be seen as including both the self-discipline to endure physical pain and the moral strength to commit to the right kind of political life. In Shakespeare's plays, it is this moral strength in which Rome is so often found wanting, yet it nonetheless survives as the ideal that Roman characters strive to live by or to die for.

Until now, the Roman has been referred to specifically as the male citizen. Yet to what extent can *virtus* (derived from the word *vir* and thus presupposing that the possessor of virtue is male) be a trait of the Roman woman? If *virtus* was viewed as moral or political courage, it became possible for women to carry out deeds that gained them recognition for virtue. One sign of this was a woman's capacity to commit a noble suicide, which is so often seen as a political act by a Roman man that it is curious that three of the most famous suicides in the city's actual or mythologised history were those of women. Dido's suicide after Aeneas's departure was an act of self-destruction driven by personal grief; Lucretia's suicide after her rape was a deed to reclaim her honour and a call for justice with political implications crucial to the birth of the republic; Cleopatra's suicide to escape the degradation of being led in triumph marked the death of the republic following Octavius Caesar's victory over Antony. The dead body of a woman, like that of a man, can thus say something. In the cases of Lucretia and Cleopatra, suicide is carried out in the spirit of *virtus*: it is a statement made to and about Rome,

as well as a spectacle with a political aim in which the woman acts as the driving force.

Furthermore, a society in which lineage is seen as an indication of virtue cannot erase its debt to women. The greater the emphasis on name and lineage, the greater the potential authority of the Roman matron. Volumnia says to her son in *Coriolanus*, "Thou art my warrior: I holp to frame thee" (V.iii.68)[1], blurring the lines between the heroic soldier and the mother who raised him to be capable of valour. The authority of class, women claiming a political space by drawing on their ties of blood and marriage to eminent men, clashes with a notion of *virtus* that would restrict it solely to the *vir*: courage can be displayed outside the battlefield, for purposes that are political even though they are not military.

I will consider the political opportunities available to Shakespeare's Roman women from two perspectives: speech and spectacle. Speech, as shown by the prominence of rhetoric and the marketplace, is key to Rome's political life. It exemplifies the paradox of Roman society: speech is highly individualistic as a demonstration of the citizen's capacity for rhetorical excellence, yet it constantly requires a show of respect for the popular voice. In spectacle, persuasion becomes even more an appeal to the collective, engaging the senses to win the crowd. Speech and spectacle are thus central to Rome, yet neither is as accessible to the Roman woman as they are to the male citizen: to what extent can Romanness grant her space to engage in political participation?

2. *Julius Caesar*

More than Shakespeare's other Roman plays, *Julius Caesar* restricts itself to what might be expected of a dramatisation of Rome. Here we find an emphasis on public rhetoric and individual honour, identity as something tied to the external recognition of that honour, and the transition from republic to empire in the company of perhaps the most celebrated Romans. This Rome stripped down to its essentials has the least interest in women and consequently provides a marked contrast to the plays that follow. It is also the coldest of them, without

[1] All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen's 2008 edition.

the emotional intensity that marks the conflicts in *Coriolanus* or the poetic resonance of *Antony and Cleopatra*'s twilight. In the nakedness with which Antony's speech reveals its manipulation of the onstage audience, *Julius Caesar* shows rhetoric at its peak while also implying that the transition to grandiose imperial displays has begun; pomp will drown out the citizens as they become merely adoring or angry mobs.

This narrowing down of political opportunities is echoed in the exclusion of women from the influence they have in *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. *Julius Caesar* only has two minor female characters; the female communities of the other plays are consequently absent. Though Portia phrases her appeal in terms of her rights as Brutus's wife, this marriage has no effect on political alliances. The continuity of names, important for sustaining the rights of the elite across generations, is uncertain: Caesar draws attention to Calpurnia's barrenness and no children appear on stage. Through the absence of avenues to power that were open to women even when they were denied public office, Shakespeare thus presents a city that has lost its former political health. With women's participation reduced to brief appearances and the public about to transform into the imperial crowd, this Rome is barren in its lack of the vibrant, varied life that enlivens the city in *Coriolanus*.

Portia's plea is the play's one instance of deliberate, layered argumentation by a female character. It occurs at home, with only wife and husband present. Portia points out the wrong done to her if their marriage is not enough to make Brutus share his fears. This denies her the social identity she should have: "Dwell I but in the suburbs / Of your good pleasure? If it be no more, / Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife" (II.i.297-9). John Michael Archer (2005: 134) comments that "In using urban geography to map her domestic exclusion, Portia reveals that she already knows that Brutus's problems are about the city and its business". While Portia does not appear in a scene of public life, the city and the way it defines identity through class and right of access are nonetheless the source of language she uses to assert her marital rights. As an assertion, however, this confronts Brutus strictly in his role as a private citizen: Portia ultimately wins from him the wife's right to know, but that knowledge does not transcend the private space in which it is imparted to her.

Even a marriage in which Brutus ultimately grants her his respect as his wife does not transform Portia into a conspirator. She can only ask frantically for news of the killing she knows is to come but will not witness herself, being neither an actor nor a member of the audience. Coppélia Kahn (1997: 99) writes that "In terms of 'the general good' as Brutus's republicanism defines it, individual moral scruples must be overcome; if such scruples are associated with a woman, and voiced only in the home, all the more reason to disregard them". In *Julius Caesar* moral choices are reserved for Roman men, while the divide between public and private is further reasserted through Calpurnia. This is in striking contrast to *Coriolanus*, where Volumnia is hailed as the triumphant defender of the public good; her reminder of Coriolanus's ties to both kin and city halts Rome's devouring by a Roman where the reasoning of men sent to plead with Coriolanus could not.

For Calpurnia, as for Portia, a domestic plea fails to transcend its origin. Her appearance in public at Caesar's side is framed as a lack rather than a presence as he calls for her passive participation in a ritual that seeks to ward off danger to the continuity she has failed to ensure: "our elders say / The barren touchèd in this holy chase / Shake off their sterile curse" (I.ii.9-11). Calpurnia's second scene is a private request for her husband to abstain from public participation. David Colclough (2009: 221) notes that

> The one striking instance of honest counsel in this part of the play is, interestingly, delivered by a woman – but even that is fatally undermined by its source, its context, Caesar's pride and susceptibility to flattery, and by an expert piece of reinterpretation.

Shakespeare's tragedies abound in examples of bad counsel leading to misrule when the errors of the king's flawed body natural are echoed on a cosmic scale by his body politic's effect on the realm. Only in *Julius Caesar* does Shakespeare place this kind of genuine supernatural presence in a Roman context, an anomaly that ascribes a greater importance to Caesar than his small role in the play itself.

Though Calpurnia speaks a warning from the gods, she fails to endow her message with an earthly authority that would make her voice listened to. Fatally to its cause, this plea joins together two things which a Roman man cannot be associated with:

CALPURNIA
Do not go forth today: call it my fear
That keeps you in the house, and not your own.
We'll send Mark Antony to the senate house,
And he shall say you are not well today.
Let me upon my knee prevail in this.
CAESAR
Mark Antony shall say I am not well,
And for thy humour I will stay at home. (II.ii.53-9)

Calpurnia will not or cannot present her advice as political counsel, so it turns on itself and, instead of allowing Caesar to deflect blame for fearfulness, presents him as governed by his wife's whimsy. Secondly, if his wife is not blamed, his poor health will be: his fit of the falling sickness has already been transformed by a derisive Cassius into a visible manifestation of inner unfitness in both the man whose body fails him and the men who permit his rule in Rome. Thus, Caesar is in danger of becoming a man who cannot control his home or his body, lacking the self-discipline that should be proof of virtue. Calpurnia's warning is sound, but the weaknesses in its presentation make it vulnerable to the alternative interpretation offered by Decius, acting as the bad counsellor. He wins the day for the conspiracy by his skill at reframing Calpurnia's dream in a manner that persuades Caesar not to risk mockery for his acquiescence to his wife's well-founded fears.

Speech thus fails the women in *Julius Caesar*, while their attendance at spectacles is not called for. What remains is virtue, so emphatically tied to the names the Romans bear. There is something almost talismanic about them, with the memory of the republic's past summoned to ward off the evils perceived to have taken hold of its present. If only this Brutus will act as a Brutus once did, order shall be restored to the world. Sharon O'Dair (1993: 289) aptly notes that

> although Shakespeare allows many of his characters – heroes and villains alike – to express some sense of separation from roles, from public activity, from definition by the group, he defines character as occurring and developing within and because of a context of others. Characters, like human beings, develop identity, a sense of self, within a context that is defined by the group.

In Shakespeare's Rome, this is true to an extent that almost overwhelms the private individual: characters are driven onward by a constant awareness of the need to live up to one's name, to be recognised for embodying something that is not yours alone but belongs to generations long gone and yet to come.

To Portia, her name offers access to a world of virtue. She has a lineage to make her worthy of her husband and to elevate them both through their union. This provides the ground for the plea that finally succeeds:

I grant I am a woman; but withal
A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife:
I grant I am a woman; but withal
A woman well-reputed, Cato's daughter.
Think you I am no stronger than my sex
Being so fathered and so husbanded? (II.i.304-9)

As she lives up to her name and transcends her sex to embrace the Romanness granted by the authority of class, Portia's act of wounding herself to prove her constancy works as virtue should: she inspires Brutus to excel by her example. Her stoic tolerance of pain is the epitome of *virtus*, here transported into a domestic context.

Yet though Portia's constancy wins her the right to know her husband in his political role as a conspirator, her ability to sustain it will be shattered by what turns out to be unbearable knowledge. Her second and last scene is essentially a disavowal of her first appearance as she desperately seeks news while trying not to betray herself: "I have a man's mind, but a woman's might. / How hard it is for women to keep counsel" (II.iv.9-10). Made aware of but kept from participation in the political, Portia's exclusion from *virtus* is completed by her death. Kahn (1997: 101) writes that

Her wound anticipates the suicidal wounds of Brutus and Cassius. Like hers, they are "voluntary wounds", cultural markers of the physical courage, autonomy, constancy that count as manly virtue; but at the same time, they demonstrate the fleshly vulnerability, the capacity to be penetrated, that marks woman.

In Portia's final wound, the vulnerability, the womanly loss of control over the body, is emphasised: "she fell distract, / And –

her attendants being absent – swallowed fire" (IV.ii.229-30). This is suicide as mere self-destruction, deprived of qualities that would define it as rational, honourable and consequently Roman. One of the most famous suicides was that of Portia's father Cato, who chose death when virtuous life was no longer possible and won greater fame for this act of opposition than anything he had achieved against Julius Caesar in life. Cato's suicide became a reminder of the path available to the Romans whose political and moral lives could no longer be reconciled. Portia's suicide, however, is presented as lacking political purpose and conscious action: she does not die as proof of *virtus*. Even the report of her death serves to elevate Brutus and not Portia by showing his control over his emotions. For the women of *Julius Caesar*, Romanness is ultimately elusive, offering not even the triumph in death that Brutus finds.

3. *Coriolanus*

Despite the bitterness between citizens of different classes, *Coriolanus* ultimately portrays a Roman republic that survives its internal challenges. Instead of being broken by conflict, as in *Julius Caesar*, or abandoned for Octavius's coldly efficient empire, which Antony and Cleopatra reject, *Coriolanus*'s republic manages to contain a variety of clashing perspectives within itself. For all the heated contempt Coriolanus displays towards Rome, his death ultimately serves the good of the community. In a way, his is *virtus* working as it should: a death in battle, outside Rome's gates, ensures the safety of the city at the cost of an individual life.

Part of the play's mixture of conflict and successful containment is the prominence given to women and ordinary men, Romans who are not part of the highest elite. The commons are characterised by the same uncertainty that can make Coriolanus troubling, courting both the sympathy and the distaste of the audience. Though vulnerable to the schemes of the tribunes, here the commons are present not merely as a mob but, though unnamed, given voice to present their arguments and comment on their rights and obligations in the approved manner of the politically involved Roman citizen. As Rita Banerjee (2006: 43) notes,

> Significantly, the people gain their objective, a long-term solution to their problems – the tribunate, a permanent voice in the government that

Coriolanus so abhors. Even if the particular tribunes misuse their power, the play does not advocate a repeal of the tribunate *per se*. And the creation of the tribunate in *Coriolanus*, unlike that in Plutarch and Livy, does not precede the rebellion, but takes place as a result of it. The concession is a form of empowerment for the people and in the long run is beneficial for the general weal.

For Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* offers a Rome that can accommodate the frailties and selfishness inseparable from human nature: it is capable of treating a political ill without the whole body of the republic succumbing to it. This Rome has room for various groups; one of these is a community of women.

A scene of women at home portrays everyday life. The essential separateness that marks Portia and Calpurnia is missing, even from Virgilia, who is defined by her silence and her brief replies when she speaks. Despite this general quietness of demeanour, she is nonetheless determined:

VALERIA
Come, lay aside your stitchery, I must have you play the idle housewife with me this afternoon.
VIRGILIA
No, good madam, I will not out of doors.
VALERIA
Not out of doors?
VOLUMNIA
She shall, she shall.
VIRGILIA
Indeed, no, by your patience: I'll not over the threshold till my lord return from the wars.
VALERIA
Fie, you confine yourself most unreasonably: come, you must go visit the good lady that lies in.
VIRGILIA
I will wish her speedy strength, and visit her with my prayers: but I cannot go thither. (I.iii.57-77)

Virgilia will await her husband's arrival at home despite the merry mockery of Valeria but, significantly, greet him outdoors; similarly, Valeria's gossip is mixed with her role as the source of military news, granting her a place in both domestic and public life. This positive

sense of community, which offers space for very different women, is far removed from the exclusionary divisions present in *Julius Caesar*.

Virgilia is moved to emotion by her fears for her husband's health, not the reports of his glory: the body that should be wounded in service to Rome is for her something else as well, dear for its own sake. In a Rome where Coriolanus is constantly reminded of his obligations to the community, she gives him the support of one who loves him as an individual. Unhae Langis (2010: 19) writes that

> Though Coriolanus calls Virgilia "my gracious silence" (2.1.161), it is less to signify wifely subjection than the feminine complement to his martial austerity. In this manner, she is the play's model of virtuous moderation, passionately defending the hearth while supporting her husband's martial and civic endeavors bravely and passively.

Moderation and self-discipline are part of the Roman ideal. It is interesting that Virgilia should be associated with a virtue rather notably lacking in the play in which Shakespeare, more than in any other work, acknowledges the potential ugliness of the struggles to attain *virtus*.

Extensive speech is required if one wishes to make a major political contribution in Rome, yet Virgilia neither practises nor longs for it. However, she still participates in Rome's rituals, leaving the house to lend support by her physical presence and briefly voiced assent. Volumnia's success leads to Virgilia being among the women hailed as Rome's saviours, not the key actor yet nonetheless part of the public. Virgilia's modesty is contrasted with Valeria's good cheer, but even Valeria is redefined in the more serious context of communal esteem when she accompanies the women who plead with Coriolanus and is greeted by him as "The noble sister of Publicola" (V.iii.70). However, the most emphatically political woman is Volumnia, who towers above all save Coriolanus himself in the impact of her vitality and theatrical presence.

Despite the presence of famous names inherited from the father, the Roman plays' most intense experience of lineage is found in the relationship of mother and son. Whereas Brutus has a duty to the ancestors who defended the republic as a Brutus should, Coriolanus must face a living mother who calls on him to remember his obligations. "Thy valiantness was mine, thou sucked'st it from me"

(III.ii.150): even the military *virtus* through which Caius Martius made himself Coriolanus is thus derived from the nursing mother. The father's role in passing on his name to his son is obscured as Volumnia claims credit for preparing her son to earn a new name in battle.

The relationship of this pair is mutually sustaining. Jarrett Walker (1992: 183-4) argues that in their final meeting, Coriolanus needs Volumnia to continue the narration through which she has given meaning to his deeds while Volumnia needs Coriolanus to perform an act for which speech alone is not enough and halt his army's advance on Rome. Volumnia's speech can only gain power through its acknowledgement by her son, as Cleopatra's commands gain power through Antony. Yet both Coriolanus and Antony have made these women so crucial to their sense of self, the recognition from the outside that is essential to community and especially to Romanness, that female speech does indeed translate into power. Volumnia praises her son and herself through him when she assigns value to the "good report" (I.iii.14) that follows worthy conduct in battle; it is Coriolanus's success that allows her elevation as the mother of such a man. Coriolanus learns that though he savagely recoils from the thought of making his wounds visible to the commons for their report, some kind of external connection is necessary to life. His attempt to "stand / As if man were author of himself / And knew no other kin" (V.iii.36-8) falters in the presence of the women and his young son. As Janet Adelman (1992: 158-61) argues, Volumnia forces Coriolanus to face his inability to endure being disowned by his mother: in the end, he halts his attack on Rome before he is left alone through his destruction of her and the city she presents as one with the body that gave him life. However, Ann C. Christensen (1997: 309) points out that

> For all her charming rhetoric of mother-hens and trampled wombs, Volumnia does not win him over simply by invoking familial/filial bonds, but by alloying them with her sense of public, civic duty, thus rendering explicit the mutual dependence of the spheres operating in the play all along.

In *Coriolanus*, Roman women are explicitly part of Rome itself, with a role to play in its life that extends beyond the domestic,

even as the role of the domestic in preparing men for public life is acknowledged. Though lacking the voice that the male citizen can use to vote Coriolanus into office, women ultimately end the threat to unity when the ritual of voting breaks down due to Coriolanus's hatred of the commons and the tribunes' scheming. Only in *Coriolanus* has Shakespeare chosen a Roman tale where the pinnacle of public esteem is reserved for a woman. Despite her exclusion from the full extent of public life, Volumnia is conscious of that vital aspect of Romanness, the need to receive recognition. She instructs Coriolanus on rhetoric:

> Because that now it lies you on to speak to th'people,
> Not by your own instruction, nor by th'matter,
> Which your heart prompts you, but with such words
> That are but roted in your tongue, though but
> Bastards and syllables of no allowance
> To your bosom's truth. (III.ii.65-70)

Practical advice is joined by emotional appeals until Volumnia achieves her aim and her son makes a second attempt to address the commons. Only Octavius Caesar is capable of such a coolly Machiavellian appraisal of a situation and its solutions, yet he lacks the vitality that gives Volumnia's words a far greater theatrical impact.

In defiance of the expectation of female silence, Volumnia is defined by her voice above all, a voice that is emphatically concerned with public representation and is in the end turned to the service of the city. Volumnia leads the petition to Coriolanus as a performance of words and acts, taking him through the arguments in favour of peace, shaming him by her kneeling, finally responding to his silence with the final blow: after she denies his relation to mother, wife and son, "I am hushed until our city be afire, / And then I'll speak a little" (V.iii.192-3). Whether a present-day actress plays the lines as broken or defiant, this is the climax of the play, the moment that forces Coriolanus to admit that he is Roman. Only the ruin of Rome could reduce Volumnia to silence; even then, the sheer force of her previous speeches must endow the thought of Volumnia "speaking a little" with the possibility of a threat and a rebuke that nothing else can match. By winning "a happy victory to

Rome" (V.iii.198) she has been "most mortal" (V.iii.201) to her son, but Coriolanus himself sees and accepts this. Christina Luckyj (1991: 338) argues that Shakespeare seeks to free Volumnia from blame for the consequences of her speech in two ways: first by presenting her as Coriolanus's connection to the natural, positive bonds of community and then focusing on how the role of his destroyer is assumed by Aufidius, the Volscian foreigner, in the final scene. I would add that Shakespeare also stages for Volumnia the only triumph in the final acts of his Roman plays. He saps the ending of much of its potential tragedy by showing the survival of Rome itself and concluding the play with a reminder of the violent pride that made Coriolanus unsuited to facing challenges with the self-discipline that is essential to idealised Romanness.

In Rome, Volumnia receives praise. She and the other women are welcomed as they enter in the company of senators, the male citizens who have reached the pinnacle of political life. Her successful speech has made Volumnia the centre of a spectacle that celebrates the city's triumph, which is also her triumph. "Behold our patroness, the life of Rome" (V.iv.1): the public is invited to look upon a woman and be grateful for her voice. The city has never been so joyous at the end of a Roman play as it is here, after the republic has survived both external and internal threats. The cost of this cohesion is the final exclusion of Coriolanus, the individual life sacrificed for the sake of the city. Part of Rome yet taking his name from the enemy, Coriolanus formed a disturbance in the city due to his unwillingness to consider whether his values might be defended, not lost, through the speaking of a language shared with others. That we never see Volumnia's pain over his loss, as we saw it earlier when Coriolanus first left Rome, distances us from this particular tragedy and prioritises the conclusion to a political conflict. The squabbling of multiple voices and classes that opened the play has now become Roman unity.

4. *Antony and Cleopatra*

The transition from republic to empire is in many ways a transition from speech to spectacle. In the cultural image of Rome, the emphasis on rhetoric in republican politics makes way for mass entertainments in the imperial era. This is not to say that spectacle was not joined to

rhetoric in the republic, but that there is a perceived decline in its importance during the empire that is often connected to a decline in morals as well. The republican Roman spoke; the imperial Roman is seen. This transition is notable in *Antony and Cleopatra*, which takes place in a political climate that differs clearly from the other Roman plays. Characters frequently note that the people must be told of what has been done, but the citizens themselves have vanished; their former political role has been reduced to mere lip service, the offering of bodies that form a crowd rather than voices that influence events. Instead of rhetoric, the skill of speaking so that the listener is convinced of the argument, the play emphasises reporting, the retelling of staged spectacles. As the audiences expand to form masses too great for any one person to be singled out, Rome expands in geographical space but contracts politically. The play's several pairs and opposites are on a march towards the final conflict of republican Rome. Empire will redefine the political landscape so that rivalry and emulation, those cornerstones of republican striving for excellence, will never take place on quite the same terms as they once did.

Cleopatra is the final challenge to republican Rome. A foreign woman who already represents the dynastic monarchy that empire will embrace, she must be displaced from her present position as Antony's partner in rule and the supreme stager of spectacles. Cleopatra and Antony, because of his association with her, are the target of more heated invective than any other rival in these plays. Yet as figures larger than life, they also inspire a kind of intense reverence that surpasses the praise for honour and excellence that ideal Romans such as Brutus received. Shakespeare calls on both the characters and the audience to take on the role of interpreter. We are presented with different kinds of evidence, first supporting one view and then another, yet all the while the action and the commentary are drawn to Cleopatra and Egypt. The dramatic weight no longer lies on Romanness, but on the experience of vitality that well-staged spectacles can grant and the question of whether this theatrical virtue is something that can be compatible with the new Rome.

Antony's speech in *Julius Caesar* has already pointed the way forward. Brutus presents the reasons for killing Caesar as an appeal to his listeners' logic, but Antony appeals to their senses and emotions by joining the movements of his body to his words and using Caesar's corpse as, essentially, a theatrical prop. Maddalena Pennacchia (2009:

56) comments that "If Brutus asks to be believed for his honour, that is on the authority principle, Antony makes his audience believe him for what they saw with their own eyes". *Antony and Cleopatra* goes one step further: we do not actually see the public performances we are told about but they are recounted to us, and it is the authority of the narrator, the emotion present in the recollection, that we are invited to believe in. As Adelman (1994: 62) says in her discussion of scepticism and assent, two of the play's key qualities, "Shakespeare disarms criticism by allowing the sceptics their full say: the whole play is in effect a test of the lovers' vision of themselves". The account of Cleopatra's arrival on the river Cydnus, delivered by the arch-sceptic Enobarbus, is the peak of Shakespeare's descriptive poetry in the play: there is no Rome without a crowd, a community that serves as a political audience, yet now Antony, its greatest speaker, has been left alone in the marketplace as the people go to see Cleopatra. The Egyptian spectacle overcomes the Roman one, and must be destroyed to make way for imperial pomp.

Cleopatra and Caesar are the play's most skilled playwrights, the difference being that he gives orders, she performs roles. Joan Lord Hall (1991: 118) compares Caesar to Antony and Cleopatra:

> His own approach to theatre is both more extreme and smaller-minded than theirs; he understands all too well the glamour of their role-playing but not its more creative aspects. […] [H]is motives are self-interested, and his impulse is to master and manipulate an occasion for public display but never be engulfed in it.

Nothing sums up Caesar better than his abrupt interruption of his eulogy for Antony when a messenger arrives: policy instantly supersedes the human connection. Caesar's advice about how events are to be represented to his advantage is at all points practical, never more obviously so than when the poetry of the eulogy makes way for the simple, direct language with which he approaches political representation:

> Go with me to my tent, where you shall see
> How hardly I was drawn into this war,
> How calm and gentle I proceeded still
> In all my writings. Go with me and see
> What I can show in this. (V.i.85-9)

We see neither Caesar nor Antony and Cleopatra in their public appearances, yet there is a world of difference in how they are narrated to us. Caesar tells us what is going to happen and what it will prove; this is an appeal to authority, not the memory of a vividly felt sensory and emotional experience that dominates the stories told of and by the protagonists. Caesar's imperial show is given such a cold, brittle air that it never moves the listener. We are made aware of its purposefulness in a manner not designed to enchant, but rather to repulse by its contrast with Antony's generosity and Cleopatra's liveliness.

The role of Octavia is also framed so as to draw sympathy away from her brother. In a play where the Romans are more isolated from their established lineages than in *Julius Caesar* or *Coriolanus*, Octavia functions as a reminder of the political participation of Roman wives and mothers. However, Shakespeare renders her marriage almost a mockery. Unlike the historical Octavia, she has no children with Antony; she speaks, or whispers, to her brother, but has little to say to her husband. There is no companionship in silence as between Virgilia and Coriolanus, no demand for respect as Portia makes to Brutus. Carol Thomas Neely (1994: 143) points out that this union "exaggerates the sociopolitical function of marriage to secure male alliances and eliminates its sexual and emotional purposes". Yet it is stated by Enobarbus to be destined to failure at its political purpose too, before Octavia ever appears on stage: "the band that seems to tie their friendship together will be the very strangler of their amity: Octavia is of a holy, cold and still conversation" (II.vi.139-41). Still in conversation where Cleopatra is quicksilver, helplessly caught between brother and husband, and reprimanded when she returns to Rome before Caesar can arrange a suitable public welcome, at every turn Octavia is there only as the shadow of participation: present, but only to be pitied. Where *Coriolanus* had space for a community of women, *Antony and Cleopatra* relocates it to Egypt, as it does all the emotive language and intensity that empire, in the person of Caesar, seems to be driving away from Rome.

The last act is devoted to Cleopatra's triumph over the cold, hard reality of Rome. With Antony dead, she must escape the humiliation Caesar has planned. Her victory rests on two factors. To quote Phyllis Rackin (1994: 97), "In the first place, [Caesar] is tricked out of his triumph: Cleopatra outwits the master manipulator at the end.

But just as important, he is beguiled in the sense that he responds to Cleopatra's charm". Cleopatra stages a scene where her acting convinces Caesar that she intends to live. This prepares the way for the second step: in the company of her maids, Cleopatra will commit suicide "after the high Roman fashion" (IV.xv.99). Fully rational as Portia's death was not, this act functions as counter-representation to the degrading show that would await her in Rome. However, even while she lays claim to an aspect of Roman virtue, Cleopatra makes her own adjustments to it and creates the one grand spectacle that is staged before the theatrical audience. Throughout the play, narrators have recounted the impact a performance had on its public: now Shakespeare has faith that the greatness of the Cleopatra on stage can at last be shown rather than told, and that it will be believed in. Cleopatra herself becomes the playwright, directing her fellow actors and arranging the props:

Show me, my women, like a queen: go fetch
My best attires. I am again for Cydnus
To meet Mark Antony. – Sirrah Iras, go. –
Now, noble Charmian, we'll dispatch indeed,
And when thou hast done this chare, I'll give thee leave
To play till doomsday. Bring our crown and all. (V.ii.269-74)

No Roman contempt for pain is asked of Cleopatra. Dying is easy, even delightful, accompanied by imaginings of how she and Antony can relive their story.

If the Roman suicide is a deed, this is a performance where the visual element is also brought into play. Cleopatra's royal lineage, her dynastic authority, is pitted against Caesar's newer claims: "Give me my robe, put on my crown: I have / Immortal longings in me" (V.ii.316-7). The dominant image of ancient Egypt is the tomb, a lasting memorial that grants life after death. Cleopatra merges it with the Roman suicide, a response to an impossible political situation, without forgetting the joy she found in performing and narrating her own memories. In consequence, she ensures that she will be remembered as she wished. Caesar is brought as close as he can be to contemplation, the creative imagination that is required to elevate spectacle from mere show to a vitally felt experience: "she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong

toil of grace" (V.ii.395-7). Cleopatra has transformed her exclusion from tangible power into a narrative in which she can be victorious. Unlike Volumnia, she can never fully embrace and be glorified by Rome's values. Yet in her defiance of her defeat, her elevation of her self above and in laughing judgement of Rome's emperor and his military might, Cleopatra proves that she can act the role of the virtuous Roman even as she reaffirms that she is an Egyptian queen. In the tradition of antiquity's most famed virtuous suicides, Cleopatra sets the stage for Rome to witness the final political act of one who has lost the day yet won the greatest of individual prizes: esteem for excellence.

References

ADELMAN, JANET, 1992, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays,* Hamlet *to* The Tempest, Routledge, New York.

ADELMAN, JANET, [1973] 1994, "Nature's Piece 'gainst Fancy: Poetry and the Structure of Belief in *Antony and Cleopatra*", in John Drakakis (ed.), *Antony and Cleopatra*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 56-77.

ARCHER, JOHN MICHAEL, 2005, *Citizen Shakespeare: Freemen and Aliens in the Language of the Plays*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

BANERJEE, RITA, 2006, "The Common Good and the Necessity of War: Emergent Republican Ideals in Shakespeare's *Henry V* and *Coriolanus*", *Comparative Drama* 40 (1), pp. 29-49.

CHRISTENSEN, ANN C., 1997, "The Return of the Domestic in *Coriolanus*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 37 (2), pp. 295-316.

COLCLOUGH, DAVID, 2009, "Talking to the Animals: Persuasion, Counsel and Their Discontents in *Julius Caesar*", in David Armitage, Conal Condren and Andrew Fitzmaurice (eds), *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, C.U.P., Cambridge, pp. 217-33.

EDWARDS, CATHERINE, 2007, *Death in Ancient Rome*, Yale U.P., New Haven.

HALL, JOAN LORD, 1991, *The Dynamics of Role-Playing in Jacobean Tragedy*, St. Martin's, New York.

KAHN, COPPÉLIA, 1997, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women*, Routledge, London.

LANGIS, UNHAE, 2010, "*Coriolanus*: Inordinate Passions and Powers in Personal and Political Governance", *Comparative Drama* 44 (1), pp. 1-27.

LUCKYJ, CHRISTINA, 1991, "Volumnia's Silence", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 31 (2), pp. 327-42.

NEELY, CAROL THOMAS, 1994, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, U. of Illinois P., Urbana.

O'DAIR, SHARON, 1993, "Social Role and the Making of Identity in *Julius Caesar*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 33 (2), pp. 289-307.

PENNACCHIA, MADDALENA, 2009, "Antony's Ring: Remediating Ancient Rhetoric and the Elizabethan Stage", in Maria Del Sapio Garbero (ed.), *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome*, Ashgate, Farnham, pp. 49-59.

RACKIN, PHYLLIS, [1972] 1994, "Shakespeare's Boy Cleopatra, the Decorum of Nature, and the Golden World of Poetry", in John Drakakis (ed.), *Antony and Cleopatra*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 78-100.

SHAKESPEARE, WILLIAM, 2008, *Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, Macmillan, Basingstoke.

WALKER, JARRETT, 1992, "Voiceless Bodies and Bodiless Voices: The Drama of Human Perception in *Coriolanus*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43 (2), pp. 170-85.