

Shakespeare in Washington: From *House of Cards* to Capitol Hill

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In the twentieth century Shakespeare became a sort of incubator of mass culture and its formulaic genres. The history of Richard III enjoyed a popularity of its own: this Machiavellian dark lord was explored in an American context by Al Pacino in the movie *Looking for Richard* (1996), where one of the main characters, Buckingham, was acted by Kevin Spacey. Together with director Sam Mendes, Spacey, in the role of Richard Gloucester, made of *Richard III* the main performance in their ambitious Bridge Project (2011).

The experience achieved by Spacey was crucial in the creation of the TV Netflix series *House of Cards*, conceived by Beau Willimon, whose pilot, directed by David Fincher, and aired on February 1, 2013, introduced the viewers to the deeds and misdeeds of the ambitious, scornful, ruthless American politician Frank Underwood, resolved to destroy enemies and friends in order to become President of the United States, explicitly a contemporary Richard Gloucester, also partly Iago, and partly Macbeth, supported by his wife Claire, interpreted by Robin Wright, a power-hungry Lady Macbeth.

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In *The Alteration*, an alternative history novel published in 1976 by the well-known British author Kingsley Amis, England is ruled by a repressive Catholic regime, and the great theatrical season flowering between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century never did blossom. While trying to fly from his destiny, Hubert, a young opera singer who must undergo castration in order to have his beautiful voice preserved, is captured by Jacob, a Jewish kidnapper of rich people, who asks for a ransom to free them. Jacob explains to Hubert that the Jews are discriminated and persecuted, and utter “some

harangue or recitation" Hubert had never heard before: "Have we not eyes? Have we not hands, organs, proportions, senses, affections, passions?", and so on (Amis 1978, 151). To the reader there are no doubts that Jacob is quoting Shylock's memorable speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (III.i.49-61). That speech as well as the name of the playwright are unknown in Amis's authoritarian England:

"You know those words? You know who wrote those words?"

"No".

"No. Your priests burnt his playhouse and his books, and would have burnt him besides but for the King, whom he'd once made to laugh".

"Laugh? What was his name?"

"So instead, you know what they did, those priests? They attached his goods and excommunicated him and transported him to New England. There, you may see his plays".

"In New England?"

"Yes, in New England. So, then?". (Amis 1978, 152)

As the imagined American Shakespeare is obviously a political author and the TV series *House of Cards* with its feigned President the main topic dealt with in this paper, we might envisage a New England *Tempest* in which two brave sailors defeat the tyrannical Duke of Milan and his minions with the help of a proud Indian warrior in order to establish the utopian commonwealth suggested by the theories of an old courtesan.

The appropriation of Shakespeare in the new American Republic implied the creation of an American Shakespeare canon, based on the belief that Shakespeare's plays embodied democratic values, such as the rebellion against absolute monarchy and the overthrowing of bloody tyrants. In a sense, the United States was the true country where Shakespeare's expectations could be fulfilled.

Such a patriotic interpretation was reinforced by the American playwright and amateur critic Delia Bacon's theories about Shakespeare's authorship, included in Bacon's *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* (1857), sponsored by Nathaniel Hawthorne, who, few years later, in a 1863 essay, would "shap[e] for posterity the unshakable image of Bacon as a madwoman in the

attic, a gothic figure who might have stepped out of the pages of his fiction" (Shapiro 2010, 121). Yet, although there is no documentary evidence supporting Bacon's findings, one admits that her remarks are quite fascinating, as they coalesce around a "compelling story of how a handful of remarkable and frustrated men, led by Bacon, began collaborating, through great drama, to oppose the 'despotism' of Queen Elizabeth and King James" (107). The fact that Delia Bacon gained a certain number of cultured sympathizers is proof that a democratic collective 'Shakespeare' was popular among the American literati and statesmen.

In any case, Shakespeare was a strong influence in nineteenth-century literary America. In *The American Renaissance* (1941), F. O. Matthiessen pinpoints his overwhelming impact on the thought and the works of Melville and other contemporary writers. Towards the end of the century, when the faith in an autonomous American culture gave rise to a hostile reaction against well-established British literary monuments such as Walter Scott and Shakespeare himself, Mark Twain's parodic bits and shreds scattered in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) forebode the deconstruction of the Bard in the popular culture of the twentieth century.

Thus, in David Brin's *The Postman* (1985), and more explicitly in the ensuing film directed and interpreted by Kevin Costner in 1997, the 'postman' Gordon Krantz performs a "bastardized, one-man version of *Macbeth*" to the inhabitants of a "Post-Chaos" American village (Brin 1985, 33-34). The implication underlying this clever science fiction novel suggests that America will be rebuilt by reconstructing the full text of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Another piece half-memorized by Gordon and appreciated by his audience is an "inspiring speech [...], that one of Abraham Lincoln's" (Brin 1985, 36), the Gettysburg Address, most likely. The real Abraham Lincoln was an enthusiastic admirer of Shakespeare's plays on the stage:

The histories and tragedies of Shakespeare that Lincoln loved most dealt with themes that would resonate to a president in the midst of civil war: political intrigue, the burdens of power, the nature of ambition, the relationship of leaders to those they governed. The plays

illuminated with stark beauty the dire consequences of civil strife, the evil wrought by jealousy and disloyalty [...]. (Goodwin 2005, 611-12)

Among his favorite plays, frequently studied and perused by him, Lincoln enumerated to the actor James Hackett: "Lear, Richard Third, Henry Eighth, Hamlet, and especially Macbeth" (611). In March 1864, one of the best young players, Edwin Booth was admired by Lincoln and by his former political rival William Henry Seward, now secretary of state, in Grover's Theatre, Washington: "They saw Booth in the title roles of Hamlet and Richard III. They applauded his performance as Brutus in *Julius Caesar* and as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*" (612). Thirteen months later, on April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth, Edwin's younger brother and an actor himself, played the role of an American Brutus off stage, killing the President, he considered a new Caesar, in Ford's Theatre, Washington.

In the visual arts, the popularity of Shakespeare was captured by John Singer Sargent in his queenly portrait of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth (1889), now at the Tate Britain Gallery, London. For the American intellectual elite the journey to England was planned also to see Shakespeare rehearsed on the London stage by the best contemporary players. This is the case of Henry James, who had read and loved Shakespeare since his childhood:

All of Henry James's work shows that he had been saturated with Shakespeare from his earliest days. He had known him as a boy in Lamb's re-telling of the plays; he had seen him acted in many forms – not only the Shakespeare of old New York theatres, but the Shakespeare of Dickensian London, and the Shakespeare of the Lyceum, the heavily costumed creatures of Henry Irving. (Edel 1977, 2:476)

Among Shakespeare's dramas, two of them were especially pertinent in the United States: *Othello*, because of the controversial mixed-blood marriage between Othello and Desdemona, pilloried also by President John Quincy Adams in 1835 (Shapiro 2020, 25-27), and *The Tempest*, the American play *par excellence*, both for its colonial setting and for the evolutionary implications of Caliban's character (159-62).

From the end of the nineteenth century, the United States witnessed the diffusion of the popular culture of the dime novels, and other printed forms of entertainment, in which the role of literary tradition was not obliterated, but, rather, made subservient to the needs of a large reading public, who could appreciate – or even be gratified by – Shakespearean plots, dramatic characters, quotations. The growth of the film industry was another landmark, and Shakespeare was one of the first classic sources exploited on the screen. He increasingly became a sort of incubator of mass culture and its formulaic genres on the screen and on the page: western, detective stories, romance, fantasy and science fiction, graphic novels (Pagetti and Cavecchi 2012-13).

Recent American television series adopt and manipulate Shakespearean plots and characters, both in the field of epic (*Game of Thrones*) and in the arena of political drama (Dyson 2019). The extremely successful *Game of Thrones* (2011-19, 8 seasons) had a distinctive imprint drawn from Shakespeare's history plays, particularly the ones involving the Wars of the Roses and the ruthless fight for the crown opposing different feudal families, although the surplus of sex would be unconceivable on the Elizabethan stage and the large amount of heroic fantasy recalls less Shakespeare than Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* stories and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Also Walter Scott's historical romance, one of Mark Twain's main polemical targets, plays a role especially in *Game of Thrones*, that could be enjoyed as a parody of the medieval values of honor, chastity, and loyalty.

In any case, the Shakespearean trend is enhanced by the acting of British and American players who had interpreted Shakespeare on the stage: in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (the second TV series, 1987-94, and a few following movies), Patrick Stewart was Jean-Luc Picard, the captain of the starship *Enterprise*. In Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*, a cinematic trilogy constantly rerun on the TV screen, Ian McKellen was Gandalf, the providential white magician. As we will see, the versatile Kevin Spacey, the main character in *House of Cards* (2013-until he was fired in 2017), is an outstanding Shakespearean actor himself.

One of the main Shakespearean figures scrutinized by the American culture is, without any doubt, the devious, crookback

Richard III. Shakespeare himself was aware of the dramatic potentialities of his Machiavellian villain, and he worked on him both in 2 *Henry VI* and 3 *Henry VI*, changing his identity from fanatical supporter of the family cause and of his father, the Duke of York, to brooding schemer denying any blood link, before unleashing all his ambiguous power of seduction (on other characters and on the audience as well) in *Richard III*. In a sense, Frank Underwood's character in *House of Cards* is the template of Shakespeare's Richard Gloucester, who consciously construes his own role in the *Henry VI* plays, until he emerges as an arch-villain, opening his mind only to the audience, in 3 *Henry VI* (*Richard Duke of York*, in the *Norton Shakespeare Histories* volume based on the Oxford Edition), to whom he reveals that he will "set the murderous Machiavel to school":

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry "Content!" to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions. (Shakespeare 2008, 3*HVI*, III.ii.193
and 182-85)

This psychological development is apparent on the screen in the 1955 colorful historical drama by Laurence Olivier, acting the lead role and directing his own production of *Richard III*. In any case, terrifying villains such as Richard III and Macbeth achieved a new strength and urgency in the aftermath of World War II, as embodiments of the Nazi *Übermensch* ideological madness (Pagetti 2007). In the same context, the heterogeneous sprawling field of American popular culture was ready to participate to the Shakespearean banquet cannibalizing, and sometimes cleverly exploiting, a whole lot of Shakespearean paraphernalia, to be exhibited to a huge audience and reading public.

In 1996, Al Pacino directed and interpreted *Looking for Richard*, an intriguing movie probing into the meaning and actual possibility of creating a version of Shakespeare's play in his own country, where the historical knowledge of medieval England and the intricacies of Shakespeare's language were largely ignored. As Pacino debates with his fellow players, a couple of British

Shakespearean actors, and a few outstanding scholars, the same rhythms of the blank verse are alien to the tradition of American theatre, although a few scattered pieces of performance in which Pacino gets the lion's share do suggest that the project of an American Richard is indeed feasible, maybe on the screen more than on the stage. One of the actors taking part in the tentative rehearsals is a youthful Kevin Spacey. Although I would not call Spacey's interpretation of Buckingham memorable (he is deprived of the repentant man's soliloquy in the Tower before his beheading), Spacey enlivens the role with sufficient ease and a touch of candor, as one of the credulous allies of the "bottled spider" (Shakespeare 2008, *RIII*). Spacey, at the beginning of a brilliant career as a movie actor, had played the cripple Roger "Verbal" Kint, a subtle and cunning character in *The Usual Suspects* (1995), directed by Bryan Singer, where he deceives the police officers questioning him about the criminal activities he was involved in by conjuring up the figure of an obscure gang leader, actually a double of himself. Spacey's American proto-Gloucestre, feigning his deformity, is unmasked too late, while the spectators see him leave the police station without hobbling and realize he was pretending to be a lame man. They were deceived as well.

A few years later, in 2011, Spacey and Richard Gloucester would meet again, this time on the stage, with the help of Sam Mendes, who had directed Spacey in the prize-winning *American Beauty* (1999). While Spacey had been artistic director of the London Old Vic since 2003, Sam Mendes was in charge of an ambitious international enterprise, the Bridge Project (Spacey, Mendes and the Bridge Project Company 2013), culminating in the performance of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, in which Spacey had the leading role, to be staged around the world, or, rather, to the Anglo-American global audiences (Pittman 2020, 6). After the debut at the Old Vic Theatre (June 18, 2011), *Richard III* was rehearsed also at the Politeama Theatre, Naples, on October 14 and 15, 2011. Spacey's interpretation was certainly impressive: a grim and sardonic hunchback, held up by a sort of orthopedic device imprisoning his left leg, and striding like a strange crustacean, he unleashes the ruthless demeanor of a grotesque creature determined to grab and preserve the crown, at the same time well aware that he has to fight

not only against his enemies, but also against his physical inadequacies. The coronation scene in which, enwrapped in an oversized royal cloak, the new king, striding towards the throne and turning his misshapen shoulders to the audience, stumbles and falls clumsily to the ground is one of the best theatrical tricks I have personally seen performed.

It is worth remembering that Mendes and Spacey were eager to pinpoint the present-day implications of their *mise-en-scène*, mentioning two dictators, Gaddafi and Mubarak, as contemporary counterparts of the Elizabethan Gloucester (Mendes and Spacey 2011). To bring home these implications, Spacey wore dark sunglasses, the ones favored by the Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi (Pittman 2020, 4). Ten years later, one wonders what they would make of the behavior of a very recent American President. One point Spacey stresses is the “unique, very special” relationship Richard establishes with the audience, because “[he] confides in his audience, and they become his co-conspirators” (Mendes and Spacey 2011). Mendes adds to Spacey’s remark: “only with Richard and Falstaff do you have a man walk to the front of the stage, eyeball the audience, and say ‘you, you people sitting in these seats, I’m talking to you directly’. It remains daring, even now” (Mendes and Spacey 2011).

While the Bridge Project was approaching his conclusion, Spacey was being involved in the production of *House of Cards*, an ambitious Netflix TV series, together with film director David Fincher, with whom he had acted in *Seven* (1995), and Beau Willimon, the original creator and scriptwriter, adapting the British author and former Conservative politician Michael Dobbs’s novel with the same title, published in 1989, and shifting it to an overtly American background, with its location based in Washington, D.C. The BBC had broadcast an English version of it in 1990. In an interview released to *The Baltimore Sun*, Spacey declared: “The great thing about the original series and Michael Dobson’s [sic] book is that they were based on Shakespeare. The direct address is absolutely *Richard III*” (quoted in *HuffPost* 2017).

On February 1, 2013, “Chapter 1”, the pilot episode, directed by Fincher, was shown on Netflix, and *House of Cards* became immediately popular, especially thanks to the performances of

Spacey (Frank Underwood, a very ambitious, experienced South Carolina congressman), and Robin Wright (his wife Claire, a veritable American Lady Macbeth). Obviously, the strong female role played by Wright immediately suggests comparisons with *Macbeth* (Auxier 2016). Yet Claire achieved a full relevance only in the following series, stretching until 2017, when, during the production of season 6, Spacey's fall into disgrace (not as an actor, but for his personal behavior as a sexual predator, although he would be acquitted of all charges brought against him) meant the exclusion of his character from the series and, ultimately, in 2018, the cancellation of the whole political saga. It is likely that the popularity of *House of Cards* was enhanced by the digging out of the bodily remains of the 'real' Richard III in Leicester (2013), and by the celebration of the Yorkist king: "it is as if Richard has found a new way to live. He has escaped the grave and moved from England. Frank is the new 'boar' who devours ribs, hates children, wields the power of his Lady Macbeth-like wife, and needs no horse" (Walker 2014, 411). In more than one sense, Underwood is certainly a hungry creature, mauling his prey like a shark or swallowing two plates of ribs at 7:30 AM at *Freddy's*.

Undoubtedly, from the very beginning, Shakespeare is the divinity presiding on *House of Cards*, through the agency of Spacey and his expertise as stage actor, despite the fact that the television medium, as it happens in a movie (i.e. in Oliver's *Richard III*), requires different techniques, and the extensive use of close-ups. The supple, ironical face of Spacey is pivotal in shaping the identity of a mischievous, razor-sharp mind, trying to seduce not only the other characters, but also the spectators, his willing accomplices, sharing his dark scheming and agreeing with his evaluation of foes and potential allies. As we are going to consider the pilot episode (a sort of declaration of intents) directed by Fincher, we will focus on Spacey-Underwood as Richard Gloucester, putting aside other remarkable influences, ranging from Macbeth to Iago. In the case of Iago, Underwood's nasty innuendos undermining President Garrett Walker's self-esteem clearly suggest an Othello-Iago relationship, but Walker, as a President-elect, is largely absent in "Chapter 1": Walker speaks through Linda Vasquez (Sakina Jaffrey), his Chief of Staff, a Latino (as Underwood tells the viewer,

with a touch of racial slur), in order to deny Underwood the job of secretary of state promised to him, because Walker (or, rather, Linda) believes he will be more useful as Majority Chief Whip in the Congress. In any case, in the pilot Underwood's asides, his frequent "breaking of the fourth wall" (*HuffPost* 2017), establish a pattern reminding at least the more educated spectators of Richard Gloucester's first soliloquies:

Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams
To set my brother Clarence and the King
In deadly hate the one against the other. (Shakespeare 2008, *RIII*,
III.i.32-35)

The picture is completed by the pleasant, carefree, somewhat humorous behavior employed by Underwood in his talking exchanges with friends and enemies, adding a genteel Southern flavor to the character. Yet, "I don't trust anyone", says he looking beyond the screen towards us, his invisible partners in crime¹. During the Presidential Inauguration Ceremony, we see him dancing and even prettily flirting with a woman politician he is manipulating. The Inauguration Ceremony allows the director and the scriptwriter to show a wide range of relevant characters, while stressing, at the same time, Underwood's loneliness, when his face fills the frame and he confidentially opens his own mind to the spectators. He is a sort of Hobbesian "Foole", who "reaps the benefits of the social contract [...] while betraying those around him" (Courtland 2016, 117).

Fincher and Willimon drew inspiration for the Presidential Inauguration from the beginning of Oliver's *Richard III*, with the gorgeous crowning of Edward IV. There, only when the court moves into the open air and rearranges itself in a magnificent pageant, the dark shadow of the crookback speaks out his own sinister and menacing mind to the audience. In *House of Cards*, we participate in the Presidential Inauguration and enjoy the merry procession of political winners, from whom Underwood-Richard,

¹ All the quotations from the TV series are taken from Fincher 2013.

very much one of them, detaches himself when he vents his bitterness and irony on the viewers.

As a matter of fact, the incipit of the pilot – or, maybe, we should say, its prologue – consists of a short episode, beginning with the noise of a car hitting someone or something in the dark. Frank Underwood steps out of his house, finds a dog hurt by the car, and decides to kill him, giving us a philosophical piece of his mind, based on his (very personal) distinction between useful and useless pain: “I have no patience for useless things”. Therefore, he kills the wounded dog, while “we begin to realize that we are somehow involved in what we are seeing. He looks at the camera – at us directly – and we have our first Underwood aside” (Gray 2016, 16). The metafictional techniques employed by Fincher break down the illusion that both the characters and viewers of *House of Cards* live in a coherent, ethically sound society: if ‘we’, the viewers, stand for Underwood, we plunge into his amoral world, and become postmodern subjects shrouded in his dark thoughts: “there’s no denying that there’s something inexplicably alluring when Frank turns to us, like the lure of a mythic siren beckoning us to rocky shores” (Aarons 2016, 57). As Shakespeare’s villain says to the audience in the above mentioned soliloquy in 3 *Henry VI*: “I’ll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall / I’ll slay more gazers than the basilisk” (Shakespeare 2008, 3HVI, III.ii.186-87). “Gazers”, indeed, are the viewers of *House of Cards*. Thanks to a televisual illusion, the viewer is permitted to be in touch – to touch – two Underwoods: the representative of the glamorous world of the Washington political elite, and the brotherly mate visiting his/her home and whispering to him/her his mischievous project beyond the looking-glass of the family television set. After all, we know the devil does exist in different places, times, shapes.

“Welcome to Washington”, Underwood says in one of his first asides. The devious (certainly not ‘frank’) Underwood hovers on the scene as a bird of prey, patiently waiting for the right time to strike in the post-Darwin world Shakespeare had foreseen in *Richard III*. Also the love relationship between Frank and his wife Claire (who revealingly calls him Francis, as if, for her, the private persona were different from the public statesman) is formulated by Underwood through a Darwinian metaphor: “I love that woman. I

love her more than sharks love blood". Much more restrained, Claire emphasizes the need of the couple to be perfectly tuned: "[W]e do things together". The fact that Claire ruthlessly manages an international charity organization constitutes a sub-plot reinforcing the role of Claire as the double of the main character, whose first name re-echoes hers: Frank and Claire, indeed.

The strong bond with Claire does not prevent Frank, or Francis, Underwood from radiating his erotic desires all around, especially when he can subjugate his lovers for his own benefit. Thus, "Chapter 1" introduces the character of the ambitious young journalist Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), who is ready to establish a secret sexual liaison with the outstanding politician in order to win access to important government documents. She will not enjoy a long life in Washington. Engineering potential sexual scandals is one of the weapons Underwood cynically deploys, also because he is well aware that his enemies, as well as his (temporary) allies, are weak, corrupted individuals, easily blackmailed, as it happens with Philadelphia representative Peter Russo (Corey Stoll), a jovial womanizer and drunkard. After encouraging his ambitions, Underwood will destroy him, as Richard Gloucester had done with Hastings or Buckingham. Later in the series, we will see that even his faithful murderous secretary Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly) – a sort of Tyrrell to Richard III – is not completely without soft spots. Anyway, he is another of Underwood's shadows, doubling him, if necessary, and speaking in the first person plural: "We can help with that", he suggests, during a secret meeting with the police commissioner who would like to be appointed Mayor of Washington.

It is worth noticing that recent interpretations have dwelt on Richard Gloucester's subversive erotic drive (Greenblatt 2008, 366). In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the sexually charged meeting between Richard and Anne is the best example, but we remember other instances in which sex and power are entangled, as in the only mentioned figure of Mrs. Shore, whose favors both King Edward IV and Lord Hastings enjoy. Incidentally, in Laurence Olivier's *Richard III*, Mrs. Shore did appear physically in the coronation scene. Richard Gloucester's sally to Clarence, unjustly imprisoned in the Tower by their brother the King – "Why, this it is when men

are ruled by women" (Shakespeare 2008, *RIII*, I.i.62) – is relevant also in the Republic of the United States. Also Richard III's speech to his soldiers before the battle of Bosworth harps brutally, even gloatingly, on the violation of the objectified female bodies, explicitly compared with the land, which the victory of the "bastard Bretons" would entail: "Shall these enjoy our lands? Lie with our wives? / Ravish our daughters?" (V.vii.66-67).

The American Shakespeare is basically involved in politics, and the American Richard is not necessarily a mean or ineffectual leader, but one willing to obliterate moral principles and personal alliances in order to rule. After all, there is a continuity between Lincoln-Julius Caesar murdered by Booth-Brutus and the would-be President-as-villain played by Spacey-Underwood, except for the fact that we have shifted from one of the most tragic events in the history of the United States to the studios of a successful TV series. Let us move back to the political reality of contemporary history. Can we see, after the recent events culminating in the insurrection and the invasion of Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, Donald Trump as King Lear, a raving, revengeful old man (overthrown, ironically, by an older rival), as it was suggested by Kathleen Parker in *The Washington Post*?

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare's tragic protagonist comes to life as fiction's most powerful example of narcissistic personality disorder, a man who devolves from being a mere fool to gradually going mad.

For the past four years, we've witnessed a similar tragedy in the person of Donald Trump, who might have been a great president but for his own many personality disorders. (Parker 2021)

The psychological approach of the *Washington Post* columnist is not entirely satisfactory in the case both of the Shakespearean tragic character and of the former U.S. President, but it is certainly revealing of the persistence of Shakespeare's world in contemporary culture. Two years before, in 2019, another *Washington Post* opinion maker, Henry Olsen, had compared Trump, under siege as the Democrats threatened to impeach him, to Lear:

An angry, bitter man who believes himself the victim of injustice will not go quietly into the night. Instead, he will meditate on the mischief of his foes and lash out.

[...]. Just as Lear found comfort in the army of the king of France, which arrived with his rejected daughter, Cordelia, to avenge his deposition, so, too, will Trump find comfort in the army of the Republican Party. (Olsen 2019)

Maybe the comparison with King Lear is a bit generous, and Trump did not certainly have to face Lear's ungrateful daughters. Trump's notorious use of fake news might indeed make him more similar to Richard Gloucester.

However, as far as Shakespeare (a great plotter in the realm of theatre and literature) is concerned, one wonders whether we might also consider in *2 Henry VI* the figure of Jack Cade, the king of misrule, self-proclaimed heir of Mortimer, therefore legitimate king of England, breaking the relatively peaceful order of the English hierarchy, full of Satanic energy. Shakespeare's rebel is not unworthy of a brave death, when he fights, a starving and destitute man, against Alexander Iden, a minor squire in Kent, who will be handsomely rewarded by the king (Shakespeare 2008, *2HVI*, V.i).

The populace following Cade and ransacking London is represented by Shakespeare as a foolish and ruthless mob, murdering their hostages because, like the Clerk of Chatham, they can write and read:

CADE

[...] Dost thou use to write thy name? Or hast thou a mark to thyself like an honest plain-dealing man?

CLERK

Sir, I thank God I have been so well brought up that I can write my name.

ALL CADE'S FOLLOWERS

He hath confessed – away with him! He's a villain and a traitor.

CADE

Away with him, I say, hang him with his pen and inkhorn about his neck. (Shakespeare 2008, *2HVI*, IV.ii.91-99)

We might imagine the Clerk of Chatham as one of the despised intellectuals belonging to the ‘deep state’ or “the New World Order”, denounced by Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric, when, on January 6, 2021, he “rehearsed the debunked allegations of massive fraud which he’d be propagating for months” (Mogelson 2021) to a mixed lot of faithful fanatics. “Before Trump had even finished his speech, approximately eight thousand people started moving up the Mall. ‘We’re storming the Capitol!’ some yelled” (Mogelson 2021), in a debased carnivalesque rewriting of the invasion of London undertaken by Jack Cade’s ragtag army. In Washington, a host of lunatics, deranged patriots and libertarians, white supremacists, self-styled Proud Boys and picturesque QAnon followers, broke into the Capitol building.

Theirs is neither the power nor the glory. Ultimately, as it happens in Shakespeare’s plays, victory belongs to the ruling class. The grinning face of Frank Underwood, like the Cheshire Cat’s, haunts us even after the downfall of the villain. “We’re in the same boat now, Zoe”, in the pilot of *House of Cards* says Richard the Shark to his accomplice, soon to become his victim, while they watch together not a TV screen, but a large picture with two rovers pushing a boat, and adds: “Take care not to tip it over. I can only save one of us from drowning”. Zoe will die without even understanding what is happening to her. In the Elizabethan universe, where God still existed, Richard Gloucester’s first victim, George of Clarence, was prophetically warned of his murder by a nightmare, related to Brackenbury, the Lieutenant of the Tower of London. Both “my brother Gloucester” and himself were “embarked to cross to Burgundy”:

[...] As we paced along
 Upon the giddy footing of the hatches,
 Methought that Gloucester stumbled, and in falling
 Struck me – that sought to stay him – overboard
 Into the tumbling billows of the main.
 O Lord! Methought what pain it was to drown,
 What dreadful noise of waters in my ears,
 What sights of ugly death within my eyes. (Shakespeare 2008, *RIII*,
 I.iv.16-23)

The metaphor of the sinking ship (and of the drowning seafarers) belongs to an old cultural tradition. In our bitter times, it could be applied to Donald Gloucester throwing overboard his former faithful ally (Vice President Mike Pence?), or to the mutinous fury of Trump's followers swallowing up the ship of state.

Waiting for the new episode of a very American saga, we wonder: where is Prospero? *Who is Prospero?*

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