SHAKESPEARE'S ROME: AN ARTICLE REVIEW BY ZACHARY HAMBY

Many scholars have debated the question: just how much did Shakespeare know about ancient Rome? And, likewise, how well did his plays capture the essence of Rome? In his introductory chapter of Shakespeare's Rome, Robert Miola addresses this question. All boys educated in Elizabethan England were very familiar with the great Roman authors, and through them, Roman history, culture, and mythology. Rome to the Elizabethan world was a golden age, the Age of Christ, a world worthy of emulation and recreation, and as Miola points out, "[n]o form of literature was more steeped in classical example than the drama" (Miola 8).

Shakespeare's Rome is an important study, for it seeks to determine Shakespeare's perception of the Romans. Apparently, Rome is a place that captivates his imagination, for he makes the Romans the subject of six of his works. Interestingly, Miola purposes that each time Shakespeare returns to his Roman subject matter, the playwright's opinion and presentation of the Romans evolves. In essence, his works were an ongoing dialogue with the Roman people. He also asserts that therein Rome is not just a city, but a character. "Embodying the heroic traditions of the past, Rome shapes its inhabitants, who often live and die according to its dictates for the approval of its future generations" (Miola 17).

Throughout his study, Miola interprets Shakespeare's changing attitude toward the Romans. In his two earliest works, *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*, Miola accuses Shakespeare of relying too heavily on his source material, resulting in a mythologized, clichéd Rome. As Miola says it, "Romans here…are stereotypes, still figures of cardboard and past, constructed from materials lying in the Elizabethan treasure chest of classical learning" (Miola 236). With *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare penetrates into the Roman world and is able to create sympathetic, moving, and altogether too human characters out of his once-cardboard Romans. Unfortunately, the most he seems to understand them, the more critical he seems to become of their ideals and their skewed devotions. Concluding his Roman explorations with *Coriolanus* and *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare seems almost out of pity and interest for the Romans—which in *Cymbeline* make way for the rise of the Britons. "Like the historical city, Shakespeare's Rome rises and falls" (Miola 236). A world that once held Shakespeare in awe reaches its twilight.

In nearly every chapter Miola uses the Roman virtue of *pietas* to explore the characters of Shakespeare's works. *Pietas* (typically translated as "duty" or "devotion") implies a devotion to the gods, to one's family, and, in particular, the *pater familias* or "father of the family".

In his chapter "Rome Divided", Miola analyzes *Julius Caesar* and its part in Shakespeare's dialogue with Rome. The play almost seems to be without a protagonist. Many scholars have formed their own theories. Julius Caesar himself seems like a logical choice because he gets top billing—but then he dies halfway through the play. Some argue that his soul obviously lives on after death and spurs on the further events of the play. Others cling to Brutus, whose actions and choices at times seem to drive the plot, warranting him the role of tragic hero. Some even argue for Antony, but Miola disagrees with all of them: "Rome is the central protagonist of the play" (Miola 72). To back up this claim, he cites a certain sense in *Julius Caesar* that none of the characters seem to act of their own free will. Their course appears pre-determined, foretold, and recorded. The characters trapped within Rome are merely playing the hand they have already been dealt. In this case, actions are superfluous, and no man is control of his own destiny. Miola cites Cinna the poet before his death at the hands of a mob: "I have no will to venture forth of doors/yet something leads me forth"(Shakespeare JC III.iii.3-4).

Miola makes the further observation that the Romans are obsessed with their glorious pasts and their prospective futures. No one seems to live for the present. Romans are apparently above such frivolity. "Imitating the past, [the characters] try to mold the present for the approval of the future…. Their struggle to impose permanent order on reality is actually an attempt to write their own history—one, the play makes clear, that is difficult and perilous" (Miola 77). Rome, past and future, is what inspires their actions, but Rome has created several paradoxes which impede their quests.

Threaded throughout the plot are two ideas: the devotion to one's family and the devotion to one's country. Time and time again, the characters choose *Rome* over *home*. Caesar ignores Calphurnia's warning. Caesar denies Metellus Cimber's plea for his banished brother. Brutus keeps his dealings secret from his wife and eventually leaves her behind when he flees the city. "All Romans, even women, must conduct themselves like heroic men….Any civilization founded on principles such as these, Shakespeare suggests, is strange, unnatural, inhuman, and doomed" (Miola 96). The Roman *pietas* is in conflict. Which is more important: the family of home or the family of Rome?

A series of ironic paradoxes and incongruities litter the play. In his pivotal scene Mark Antony appeals to the citizens' Roman sense of *pietas*. He casts Caesar in the role of father of the country. Who are his assassins then, but murderers of a *pater familias*? Ironically, during their riot, the Roman people become akin to the barbarians their armies seek to oppress. After their successful coup, one achieved by appealing to *pietas*, Lepidus and Antony both agree to the death of family members. Brutus and Cassius murder Caesar for idealistic reasons, yet when fled from Rome, they struggle to keep an idealized view of their actions. As Miola states, "there is something at once admirable and pitiable in such heroic self-delusion" (Miola 110).

Another problem the characters frequently encounter is the difficulty of judging truly. The characters struggle to make sense of the world around them: what is fact and what is fancy? Time and time again, they fail when they attempt to plot the appropriate course which

will lead them to an honorable future. Caesar fails to heed the warnings of the soothsayer and Calphurnia, while Brutus underestimates Marc Antony. What Cassius sees as a battlefield defeat is not truly one.

Also, in their efforts to be immortalized, the characters lose their purpose and begin to act like those they once sought to destroy. Brutus, after the assassination, takes on the qualities of Caesar. Antony, who reviles Brutus and Cassius for their treacherous behavior, becomes a rebel and traitor himself in order to be revenged upon them. Their purposes also go astray: Julius Caesar's ambitions are cut short by the senator's daggers, Brutus fails to restore the Republic, and, as history tells us, even the alliance between Antony and Octavian dissipates. Apparently, men cannot write their own histories. Miola states, "No matter how much these Romans try, no matter how much they suffer, the force of history frustrates their intentions" (78).

The ultimate Roman example of *pietas* was the legendary hero Aeneas, who escaped the burning city of Troy while carrying his elderly father upon his back. Roman poets such as Virgil in his Aeneid exemplified Aeneas as the epitome of this (and many other) virtues. Shakespeare uses many Roman authors to enhance his own plays. As for Virgil, many of Shakespeare's passages of description hearken back to key events of the *Aeneid*. Cassius also references Virgil by casting himself in the role of Aeneas as he drags Caesar, a would-be Caesar, from a raging river. Shakespeare uses his knowledge of Livy's History of Rome to draw many parallels between Caesar and Romulus. The feast of Lupercal, a ritual supposedly started by Romulus, plays a prominent part in the play. Caesar hopes to start a line of kings, just as Romulus did. Both rulers gained power through the deaths of a former partner and became stars after their deaths.

Part of the brilliance of Shakespeare and of the play is that there is no apparent slant on the events of Julius Caesar's death. Was Caesar a tyrant who deserved his fate? Or was he actually the victim of cruel jealousy? Shakespeare does not give a definite answer. Neither was he dealing with a fresh topic. Julius Caesar was a figure of great importance to the people of the Renaissance, and the events of his assassination were well known to all through histories, poems, and even other plays. Like Plutarch, his source, Shakespeare chooses to give a glimpse of legendary event open to the audience's interpretation, rather than moralizing on the subject. *Julius Caesar* "insists upon, the complexity and ambivalence of Caesar's story" (Ernest Schanzer qtd. in Miola 77).

Shakespeare's Rome is a important piece of criticism, for it attempts to elucidate Shakespeare's ongoing dialogue with the Romans he made his subject matter time and time again. For better or for worse, Shakespeare's concepts of these ancient people have influenced our own. By better understanding his perspective, as well as the techniques that he used to give them depth and reality in his works, we may enter into a dialogue ourselves with those noble Romans of the past.

SOURCE

Miola, Robert S. *Shakespeare's Rome*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Print.